The New Criterion

September 1999

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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William Jay Smith's most recent book is *The World Below the Window: Poems 1937–1997* (Johns Hopkins).

Mark Steyn's *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight* was published last Spring by Routledge.

Richard Tillinghast's new and selected poems, *Today in the Café Trieste* (Salmon Publishing, Ireland), is available from Dufour Editions.

Karen Wilkin's latest book is *Isaac Witkin* (Hudson Hills Press).

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Notes & Comments: September 1999

The Pew's five-year plan for bureaucratizing the arts

Is the United States in urgent need of a national cultural policy? Is it likely to improve the quality of American cultural life if the Federal government establishes something like a ministry of culture in Washington to oversee the life of the arts in this country? Is access to the arts now to be made a government entitlement on the model of Social Security, Medicare, or—what may be a more plausible parallel—our failed Welfare programs? If so, who is to determine what qualifies as "art" under the jurisdiction of a national cultural policy? What, for that matter, will the now amorphous and much abused term "culture," which once meant high culture but can now mean anything from museum exhibitions of motorcycles to the pornographic doggerel of rap music, actually signify for the bureaucracies that would be empowered to assess its value?

These are but a few of the alarming questions that have been raised by the announcement this summer of a new multi-million-dollar "initiative" to "optimize America's cultural resources" by the Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia. While the Pew announcement does not specifically identify the goal of this massive initiative as the establishment of a new Federal agency for the arts, its gruesomely bureaucratic approach to what is described as "a new era of cultural policy development to ensure that the cultural policy heritage and artistic resources of the United States are appropriately sustained and supported" is clearly a call for more centralized regulation of the arts and their institutions. This, in our view, is a very unwelcome prospect.

Moreover, with the Pew's calling for "building an infrastructure for the development of more effective private and public policies affecting American arts and culture," and its promise of "a new world of accountability" in the arts, not to mention its reference to "segments of the nation" that are "culturally underserved," we are reminded of nothing so much as the political and statistical propaganda blitz that preceded the endorsed transformation of medical practice in this country into the bureaucratic nightmare it has become today. For in the arts, as in the practice of medicine, every increase in bureaucratization results in a significant loss of standards. What we are being persuaded to implement in the Pew's proposals is something like a system of HMO's for the nation's cultural health. Which means, of course, more bureaucracy, more regulation, less choice, but also more emphasis on the arts as, in the words of the foundation's own announcement, a "vital part of our society," with some bureaucratic

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entity determining what is "appropriate" for the cultural health of the nation.

Then, too, there is the problem of the role assigned to the media in the Pew's vision of the future of the arts in America. In an interview with *The New York Times* this summer, Marian A. Godfrey, director of the culture program for the Pew Charitable Trusts, was eager to acknowledge that "A big part of our effort will be the media part." This, too, is bad news. For while there are few things about the life of the arts in this country that can be regarded as absolutely certain, one of them surely is that the increasing role of the media—especially television—in reporting, "reviewing," and otherwise publicizing the arts has itself become more of an obstacle than a contribution to a serious public understanding of the arts. For the interests of the media and the interests of the arts are seldom the same. What the media are primarily interested in are celebrity, novelty, and controversy—in a word: news—while the arts, at their highest levels anyway, are governed by longer-term considerations that do not lend themselves to capsule media coverage. Often the only extended media coverage a serious artist receives today is to be found on the obituary page of a few newspapers. Even the Sunday art page of *The New York Times* has pretty much abandoned its coverage of the New York exhibition scene in favor of more topical or political art-related subjects.

Politics is, of course, another thing that has had a detrimental impact on the mainstream media's coverage of the arts, for the left-liberal bias of the media is reflected in the mindset of its arts reportage and reviewing, where house rules on political correctness shape judgment and opinion, and multiculturalist ideology often determines the very performances and publications that are given featured attention. The arts coverage on National Public Radio and PBS is the most notorious offender in this regard, but our few remaining quality newspapers are often just as bad. There is, in any case, an obvious bias in favor of popular culture in the mainstream media that makes it difficult for the fine arts to receive the attention they deserve.

It speaks volumes about the mindset of the Pew's own program for the arts that its announcement links "media and advocacy" as virtually identical enterprises, and you can be sure that recipients of the funds that the Pew Charitable Trusts will henceforth be lavishing upon the media will be obliged to meet some pretty strict standards of "advocacy"—advocacy, that is, for the bureaucratic behemoth that the Pew's multi-million-dollar "initiative" is designed to bring into existence.

Mega-museum vs. art museum

In *The Voices of Silence* (1952), André Malraux speculated that advances in photography and printing were on the brink of ushering in the age of "the museum without walls," putting at our fingertips resources that would "carry infinitely farther that revelation of the world of art . . . which the 'real' museums offer within their walls."

Yes, well. It has turned out, of course, that walls are the one thing museums cannot get enough of. Everywhere one looks, museums are engaged in "ambitious" (i.e., huge and expensive) expansions. This is especially true of that vaguely oxymoronic phenomenon, the museum of contemporary art. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum—what might be more accurately called the Guggenheim Consortium—was a pioneer in this dubious development. Under the entrepreneurial directorship of Thomas Krens, the museum did not simply expand, it went global, consigning its permanent collection of modernist masterpieces to adjunct status and adding outlets—er, that is, branches—not only in SoHo but also around the world. The most recent one is Frank Gehry's titanium-clad structure in Bilbao, Spain, which gobbled up a season's worth of adulation and publicity.

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If the Guggenheim was in the vanguard, other institutions have been quick to catch up. Consider the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Some months ago in this space, we reported on MOMA's new plans to embark on the largest expansion in its sixty-year history. It somehow seemed appropriate that part of the expansion was to be into space now occupied by an abandoned hotel: "here today, gone tomorrow" might well be the motto of many museums of modern art these days. More and more, it seems, museums are bent on what MOMA's director Glenn D. Lowry described—apparently without irony—as "privileging the contemporary." What this means in practice, we pointed out, is that the museum will compromise on its curatorial obligations for the sake of more ephemeral rewards: publicity, box office triumphs, and what Tina Brown has taught us to call "buzz."

Museums in other countries, too, have been quick to follow suit. London's Tate Gallery is a case in point. The museum recently opened large branches in Liverpool and St. Ives; it is undertaking a gigantic expansion of its "home" galleries in Millbank, London; and it is in the concluding stages of converting a huge disused power station directly across from St. Paul's in Bankside into the Tate Gallery of Modern Art at a cost of £134 million (due to open in May 2000). When Tate officials came to New York last spring to publicize their new museum of modern art—the presentation, appropriately, was held at MOMA—they might as well have been announcing a new theme park for the Disney company. Attendance figures loomed large in the presentation: we forget how many millions of visitors per year were predicted. A slick video was shown that might have been advertising the latest copy machine or roadster. Our tour of the construction site in London this summer did nothing to dispel the impression of the higher hucksterism. We predict that, like so many industrial spaces that have been converted into art galleries, the best thing about the Tate Gallery of Modern Art will its building.

This is small consolation, however. For at the Tate, as at MOMA and virtually every other gallery or art museum devoted to contemporary art, a battle is being waged. It is a battle to determine the basic principles that will guide museums in the coming decades. Will connoisseurship and aesthetic discrimination provide the lead? Or will publicity considerations be allowed to trump artistic considerations? Will quality prevail? Or will quantity triumph?

We are not optimistic. For not only have museums of modern and contemporary art rushed to embrace "the new"—or what they believe to be new—at any cost, but similar imperatives are increasingly at work at traditional art institutions. An especially grim augury was the news that Malcolm Rogers, the director of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, had undertaken a program of what we might call "aesthetic cleansing." At the end of June, Mr. Rogers suddenly announced that the museum, in addition to embarking on a huge building program, was going to be "restructured." He eliminated eighteen positions, summarily dismissed two highly regarded and long-serving curators (one day they were told to clean out their desks and be gone by 3:00 P.M.), and amalgamated the museum's departments into what *The New York Times* rightly called "mega-departments," organized not according to medium but geographically. "The new Art of the Americas department," the *Times* reported, "unites the departments of American paintings, American decorative arts and pre-Columbian art, while Art of Europe combines European paintings and European decorative arts." The message could not be clearer: at the Museum of Fine Arts, multicultural goulash would henceforth be given priority over aesthetics and art historical scholarship. "An art gallery," André Malraux also wrote in *The Voices of Silence*, "is one of the places which show man at his noblest." That was in 1952. We wonder what, were he still with us, he would say about the art gallery of today.

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Literary victimhood

by Anthony Daniels

On August 22, 1993, it was announced that a novel entitled *The Hand that Signed the Paper* by Helen Demidenko had won the annual Vogel Prize for a hitherto unpublished manuscript by an Australian author under the age of thirty-five. The award consisted of A$13,500 and publication by the reputable firm of Allen and Unwin—the publishers of Bertrand Russell, among others. Her book was soon to win two further literary prizes: the 1995 Miles Franklin Prize for the best novel concerning Australian life (a previous winner having been Patrick White, the Nobel laureate), and the Gold Medal of the Australian Literature Society.

Helen Demidenko was a striking figure. She was six feet tall and had nearly waist-length blond hair that was so fair it was almost white. When she won the Vogel Prize she was only twenty-two, a recent graduate in English literature with high honors from Queensland University. She was stridently self-confident and opinionated. When she appeared in public—which she did frequently—she wore Ukrainian national costume and rarely lost an opportunity to break into a Ukrainian folk dance.

Her father, she said, was Ukrainian. He emigrated to Australia in 1951, meeting a Gaelic-speaking Catholic from Northern Ireland on the boat. Apparently united by their mutual inability to communicate in English, they married and had four children, of whom Helen was the youngest.

The Hand that Signed the Paper is a short novel that seems at first sight to be highly autobiographical: as, indeed, first novels by people of Helen Demidenko's age usually are. In the book, a young Australian woman, of Ukrainian-Irish descent, who is also a student at Queensland University, discovers that her father and uncle joined the SS in the Ukraine during the war, and that her aunt married a German SS officer who was the leader of an *Einsatzgruppe* in charge of killing Jews. Her father participated in the massacre at Babi Yar, while her uncle worked as a guard at Treblinka. The latter, whom she knows as a kindly old man, is about to be tried as a war criminal under recent Australian legislation. He dies of a stroke before the trial begins, however, and the young woman goes on a journey to Treblinka where, by chance, she meets a German whose father was killed there for his Quaker beliefs and his pacifism. Thus the families of the perpetrators and the victims are reconciled.

The story is told mainly through the words of three protagonists: the young student Fiona Kovalenko, her aunt Kateryna Kovalenko, and her uncle Vitaly Kovalenko. The tone of the writing is generally flat and unemotional, a quality much admired by the book's apologists. The main purpose of the novel appears to be to explain how ordinary people can participate in the most barbarous actions imaginable (Uncle Vitaly, for example, throws babies up in the air to

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be caught on a comrade's bayonet, and bayonets one baby himself). It is an attempt to enter the minds of genocidal murderers.

The Hand that Signed the Paper also suggests that barbarism such as that perpetrated by the Kovalenko family is part of a natural cycle of offence and revenge that can be broken only by forgiveness. The explanation given by the Kovalenkos for their behavior during the war is that they themselves had been the victims of Stalin's famine, which they believed was executed not only at the behest of, but to the advantage of Jews. They believed that the Bolshevism that brought them such intense suffering was in fact a Jewish conspiracy. Thus the Holocaust was nothing but a further turn of the wheel of suffering: the whirligig of time that brings in its revenges.

There is, of course, nothing inherently anti-Semitic in the attempt to enter the minds of anti-Semites. One might even argue that it is important to try to do so. Unfortunately, there can be no doubt that Demidenko herself was strongly anti-Semitic, and that the sentiments expressed by her protagonists were essentially her own. The evidence for this is both internal and external to the book, though in fact she did everything possible in this instance to conflate the tale and its teller.

It took a little while for the anti-Semitic nature of *The Hand that Signed the Paper* to be noticed in Australia, though it was hardly difficult to discern. The Jewish characters are practically all delineated in a way that Julius Streicher would have approved: ugly, rapacious, and cruel. The Ukrainian characters, who emerge unflatteringly as stupid, concupiscent, and drunken, but with whom we are evidently supposed to sympathize, self-consciously explain their own brutality by their previous sufferings, and this is a view we the readers must take seriously in order for the book to have any meaning or point at all. For example, the behavior of Ivan the Terrible, the most vicious of all the concentration camp guards, is explained en passant by the "fact" (for which there is no historical evidence whatsoever) that Jewish Bolsheviks massacred six members of his family in front of him. No wonder, then, that he took his revenge when the opportunity arose.

This is clearly the opinion of its author and not just that of the characters she created. Her book was prefaced by an author's note which stated: "What follows is a work of fiction. . . . Nonetheless, it would be ridiculous to pretend that this book is unhistorical." Moreover, in the original manuscript of the book, the principal characters were called Demidenko (the author's own surname), not Kovalenko, suggesting the intended historical verisimiltude of what followed. Indeed, when the controversy over her novel finally broke in Australia, Demidenko suggested that much of her information in writing it had come from interviews with her own family and other Ukrainians. As the author's note put it, "There are many stories in the world. People speak; stories are passed on." Her book was not, then, presented to the public as a work of pure imagination.

Both Demidenko's former boyfriend and another friend of hers called Natalie Jane Prior (who wrote a book about the Demidenko affair) testified to her personal anti-Semitism. Demidenko claimed to have been threatened with death by "loony Zionists," an expression that only an anti-Semite would have used. (There was no evidence other than her own word that she had ever been threatened by anyone.) In a televised debate with an Australian conservative political commentator, Gerald Henderson, Demidenko said that Henderson, a gentile who had accused her of gross historical inaccuracy and anti-Semitism, seemed to be speaking on behalf of the Jews, which she implied was a sinister thing for him to do.

It eventually emerged, however, through the work of an investigative journalist from Brisbane, that Demidenko was not of Ukrainian origin at all: that, in the words of one Australian wag, she was not even a Semi-Demidenko. Her father was not called Marko Demidenko and was not the illiter-

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ate Ukrainian taxi driver and former cane-cutter in Northern Queensland she had claimed him to be (for a time this fictional character was by far the most famous taxi driver in the whole of Australia). On the contrary, she was the daughter of English immigrants from the north of England, and her real name was Helen Darville. For a time she tried still to maintain that there was indeed a Ukrainian side of her family, but under the threat of having her prizes revoked, she was forced to issue a statement abjuring her previous falsifications. She was Helen Darville and that was all there was to it. Her parents were English. Her novel was subsequently reissued under her true name, with the author's note omitted.

The literati who had awarded Helen D. (as she was henceforth known for the sake of brevity) Australia's literary prizes defended themselves from mockery and derision by arguing that her novel was all the more remarkable a feat of the imagination for being entirely fictional, and not, as they had previously assumed it to be, a work of fiction in part culled from speaking to her relatives.

The whole Demidenko affair raised many intersecting questions of psychological and sociological interest. To what extent was she a conscious fraud? From where and from whom did she derive her anti-Semitism? Why was it easy to deceive so large a section of the Australian intelligentsia?

That Helen D. was a very strange person indeed hardly needs saying. She was in fact a chronic fantasist, a Baroness Munchausen, and her Ukrainian ancestry was not her only falsification by any means, or even her first assumed nationality (she had previously claimed at university to be of French, Belgian, and Czech origin). She told a huge number of entirely refutable lies during her brief public existence as Demidenko, among others that she was a university teacher in mathematics and a courtroom lawyer. For example, she concluded her written reply to one of her critics, published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on June 27, 1995, as follows: "But I've also spent a good part of my life in courtrooms. . . . Most lawyers talk to win. This lawyer prefers just to talk." She was twenty-four years old when she wrote these vainglorious words, but the improbability of her having spent a "good part" of her hitherto rather short existence in courtrooms failed to alert anyone to her deceit.

Her anti-Semitism at least seems to have been genuine, deeply felt, and consistent. In 1988, at the age of seventeen, in her pre-Demidenko days, she had contributed a story to her school magazine entitled "Demjanjuk versus the State of Israel," an imagined first-person narrative by Demjanjuk. At the time, John Demjanjuk, a Ukrainian immigrant to the United States, was facing trial in Israel because he was believed—mistakenly—to be Ivan the Terrible; moreover, the Australian parliament was debating the adoption of legislation permitting war crime trials to take place in Australia. Helen D. believed Demjanjuk to be Ivan, but her sympathies were with him nonetheless, not despite his identity but because of it: in the story, Ivan the Terrible is portrayed as a mere victim of circumstances beyond his control, his accusers being hypocrites. Besides, the past was the past, gone and done with. Abiding within him was a person of inestimable value: "If they knew myself and not my deeds," he says in Helen D.'s story, "then they would befriend me."

In choosing the pseudonym Demidenko, Helen D. confirmed her empathy with Ivan the Terrible's predicament: for she appears to have chosen the name Demidenko (before she ever wrote her book, and without any certainty of ever entering the public eye) as a kind of gesture of solidarity with him. The name Demidenko is that of a Ukrainian executioner and mass killer, mentioned in Anatolii Kuznetsov's book *Babi Yar*, Martin Gilbert's *The Holocaust* and D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, all three of which she is known to have read.

The assumption of a false ethnic identity by an author is by no means unprecedented in Australia, however, even if few have gone as far as Helen D. in making an exhibition

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of it. She was no doubt aided by her plausibly Ukrainian appearance, while the principle ethnic reinvention of authors has been from European to Aborigine, which is rather more difficult to substantiate in front of television cameras. For example, the novelists B. Wongar and Wanda Koolmatrie claimed Aboriginal descent, though both are white, the former being a Serb called Sreten Bozic, and the latter being Leon Carmen. As for Mr. Carmen, he changed not only his race but also his sex for the sake of his literary deception, and his book was published by an Aboriginal publishing collective in part funded by the government. Wongar and Koolmatrie were carrying on the tradition started by Colin Johnson, said to be the first Aborigine to publish a novel based on his experience. He changed his name from Johnson to Mudrooroo Nyoongah, and then to Mudrooroo alone. His sister, however, denied that he was Aborigine. "Identity is a fragile thing," he said, "and can be taken away just as quickly as it can be given."

There have also been several artists who have become Aboriginal comparatively late in life. One, of Indian descent, secured a contract to design greetings cards "in Aborginal style"—the sending of greetings cards being, of course, an ancient Aboriginal custom. A sculptor by the name of Beck became Lawrence Gundabuka and changed the names of his children to Naadjongbila, Bujara, and Bidjigal, though his wife continued to call them by their original names. And one of the most acclaimed Aboriginal artists, Eddie Burrup, turned out to be Elizabeth Durack.

The motives for these changes of ethnic identity are not difficult to imagine. Work which would receive little notice if it were merely that of writers or artists of European descent is more likely to be acclaimed if it is the work of Aborigines: a fact which disguises both deep condescension and a continued skepticism as to the equality of the races. Moreover, the Aboriginal is a victim race, towards which the Europeans have (not without cause) a guilty conscience. If you are a member of a victim race, you are, ex officio, a victim: and to be a victim in the modern world is to have achieved automatic moral superiority. Since Australia is the Lucky Country—a country that it would take political incompetence and malevolence on an Argentinian scale to ruin—it is difficult to be both a middle-class intellectual and a victim there, except by change of ethnic identity.

Of course, it is possible to achieve victim status (the personal equivalent of most favored nation) by claiming experience one has not had without otherwise changing one's identity. A book published in 1995 in Australia, called *Stoker*, by Donald Watt, is alleged to have done precisely this. On reading that the Australian government had agreed to pay A$10,000 to all Australians who had been imprisoned in German concentration camps during the war, Mr. Watt revealed after a gap of over forty years that he, too, had been at Auschwitz, where he had stoked the furnaces for several months. His book was a bestseller. It has not been conclusively proved to be a fraud, but all Holocaust scholars think that it is.

This literary assumption of victimhood is not confined to Australia, of course: the Swiss clarinetist Binyamin Wilkomirski wrote an international bestseller which claimed that, far from having been brought up in Switzerland (another lucky country), as the documentary evidence seemed to suggest, he spent his early life in Majdanek and Auschwitz escaping extermination. Much ink has been spilt on the question of whether he was a deliberate fraud or whether he had come to believe his own inventions. The really interesting question, however, is why and in what cultural climate anyone would wish to claim such terrible experiences as his own unless he had actually had them.

But what has the assumption of victimhood to do with Helen D., who identified, after all, with perpetrators, not victims? In fact, her novel and fictional persona represent the *ne plus ultra* of assumed victim

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status. Her self-dramatization is declared by the very first sentence of her novel, written in the voice of Fiona Kovalenko (Fiona, incidentally, is Helen D.'s real middle name):

> As I drive down the Pacific Highway, the French are busy dropping bombs into the waters in which my nieces swim, the Americans and Iraqis are engaged in a bizarre competition to see who can destroy the world many times over most, and my uncle will soon be on trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In other words, the author-protagonist is not just a student of middle-class background who has progressed through life in an ordinary and orderly fashion, but someone who is personally connected to the great dramas of the twentieth century. At work here is a psychological syllogism common among young western intellectuals:

- Only people who have suffered through a connection to the horrific events of our century can have anything worthwhile to say.
- I have something worthwhile to say.
- Therefore I have suffered through a connection to the horrific events of our century.

Helen D., during her incarnation as Helen Demidenko, claimed that her Ukrainian descent and membership in the working class had caused her many problems at school and elsewhere: problems that amounted virtually to persecution. She spoke of her shame when her father drove his beaten-up car to school among all the Mercedes and BMWs of the other families, and of how her parents, on learning that she had been made head girl of her school, poured vodka over her head, to her great shame and embarrassment. She wrote of her childhood in the working-class suburbs where lives peter out in hopelessness:

> We sat in the long grass before our commission houses and played war games in the bodies of abandoned cars. We dared each other to run across the freeway and pinched packets of chips and bottles of Coke from Fang Yu's Foodstore. We celebrated dole day every fortnight while our parents renamed it "vodka day," "beer day," or "raki day" depending on their ethnicity. We watched telly and ate junk food and told each other stories about who was fucking whom and just why Mrs. Izbegevic's husband had given her a broken nose.

Where fantasists would once have invented privileged aristocratic backgrounds for themselves, they now invent childhoods filled with misery. It is lack of privilege, not privilege, that now confers prestige upon a person's biography.

But fantasizing an unhappy and impoverished childhood was not the only or even the most important of Helen D.'s contribution to the philosophy of victimization. By seeking in her novel to engage her readers' sympathies for the subsequent plight of people who not only have committed the most dreadful deeds imaginable, but also have not in the least repented of them (Evheny Kovalenko, for example, keeps photos of his time at Babi Yar in his bedside drawer, while Uncle Vitaly still wears the gold spectacle frames of one of his victims), Helen D. is in effect asserting that her protagonists are the unfortunate victims of their own conduct. Such an extraordinary paradox can arise because, in her opinion, what people are is not in the least connected with, let alone determined by, what they do. Hence Ivan the Terrible's failure to understand, in her early story, why the Israelis do not love him for what he is instead of pedantically concentrating on what he had done.

The idea that people are the victims of their own conduct is, of course, part of the zeitgeist, and *The Hand that Signed the Paper* is only its *reductio ad absurdum*. I meet the idea daily in my medical practice. Patients present me with their behavior as if it had nothing to do with them, as if the fact that they beat their wives or lovers, burgled houses, took drugs, gambled heavily, as-

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sociated with the wrong people, etc., was not actually constitutive of their personality, but something entirely alien to it which it is my duty as the doctor to treat and eliminate. Innumerable patients have told me, as they describe their vile habits (which nevertheless bring them illicit and unrecognized enjoyment) that "It's just not me, doctor, it's just not me, I'm not like that" —though they have been doing that all their adult lives. They have soulmates both in Helen D. and in the characters in her book. Uncle Vitaly just isn't the kind of man to toss babies in the air for a friend to bayonet: though he did so. Fortunately, his benign Platonic essence remains unaffected by his conduct in the merely phenomenal, and therefore inferior and unimportant, world below.

The supply of victims is equalled only by the demand for them, which is likewise inexhaustible. Victims are essential to our well-being because they provide us with the opportunity to establish our virtue in public by expressing our sympathy for, or empathy with, them. Perhaps this explains why it took so long for Australian intellectuals to see Helen D.'s book for what it was: they were so busy empathizing with the terrible predicament of a nice Australian girl discovering that her close relatives were mass murderers that they failed to notice that the book was a fraud and that the morality it preached (and it did preach, as any reading of it will demonstrate) was both superficial and disgusting. Today, there is no vice worse than that of failing to empathize with suffering, and no method of distinguishing between real and fake, or assumed, suffering: therefore it was necessary to empathize with Helen Demidenko.

The thirst for victims and victimhood explains the existence not only of literary Munchausen Syndrome, but also of literary Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy. Perhaps the purest and most important example of this phenomenon is the book *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Supposedly the unvarnished testimony of a Guatemalan Indian woman, cataloging the hideous treatment of Guatemalan Indians by the Guatemalan army and government, it was actually a highly refined product, the result of a collaboration between Rigoberta Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, the upper-class Venezuelan radical and former wife of Regis Debray, Che Guevara's French admirer and associate in his Bolivian adventure. It is not difficult to guess who had the upper hand in the collaboration, the resulting book being full of inaccuracies, simplifications, and outright inventions, all of which suggested to the intelligentsia of Western Europe and North America the imperative necessity of bloody revolution in Guatemala.

It isn't only literary types such as Helen D. and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, however, who fake suffering and victimhood: the *British Journal of Psychiatry* recently published a paper about twelve people who claimed falsely to be stalked. I was intrigued to notice that the paper came from the Lucky Country, Australia. Its luck has run out, it seems, because people don't want to be lucky: they want to be victims. According to Helen D.'s friend, Natalie Jane Prior, the Demidenko affair had a not altogether unwelcome moral: "In the end," she wrote, "everyone was a victim." Naturally, "everyone" must have included Helen D. herself, who could only have been a victim of her own conduct. So she was right after all.

But victims nevertheless require victimizers, who must be external to themselves, otherwise there would be no gratification in it. Besides, it is logically impossible for anyone to believe that everyone, himself included, is a victim. For Helen D. the victimizers were—and probably still are—the Jews. For the vast majority of more or less well-adjusted western humanity, their favored victimizers are their parents: for no one is so completely a determinist that he absolves his parents of blame for his misery.

Australians have often worried that their country is a provincial backwater. But as the Demidenko affair has demonstrated, it is not only in the mainstream of modern culture, it is quite possibly in its vanguard.

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Letters by Dawn Powell to Edmund Wilson

introduction by Tim Page

Dawn Powell and Edmund Wilson enjoyed a long and comfortable friendship from the early 1930s until Powell's death in 1965. It remains unclear how and when they met—perhaps at the Brooklyn Heights home of Powell's patron, Margaret De Silver and her anarchist lover, Carlo Tresca; perhaps at what Wilson later referred to as one of Powell's own "knock down and drag out" parties.

Powell and Wilson shared many qualities—staunch independence, voracious curiosity, catholic and wide-ranging interest in the arts, political skepticism (Wilson's curious regard for the Soviet Union notwithstanding), and a taste for good food and liquor. Wilson was one of three people to whom Powell wrote her most specifically "literary" letters; the other two recipients were John Dos Passos and her cousin John F. (Jack) Sherman, a businessman and educator in Shelby, Ohio, who became the guardian of her son and, later, the person who provided the familial authority to free the Powell estate from a long limbo.

Wilson admired the wit and spirit of Powell's novels. But he often found them unfinished—an "all but final drafts," as he put it. When Wilson wrote a perceptive, affectionate but decidedly mixed review of *My Home Is Far Away* for *The New Yorker* in 1944, the friendship barely survived and Powell believed he had done her "real harm." Perhaps he thought better of this tender quasi-autobiographical novel of childhood as time went by; in any event, Wilson never reprinted his review in any of his collections, and, in 1962, wrote another *New Yorker* review, this time of *The Golden Spur*, that proved to be far and away the most thoughtful and appreciative summary of Powell's work published during her lifetime.

Selected Letters of Dawn Powell, which will be published this month by Henry Holt, is unapologetically a reading edition. Spellings have been corrected (with the exception of obvious and purposeful derivations such as "Pewlitzer"), and I have tightened or abridged letters in several places. The complete known correspondence may be found in two locations: Dawn Powell's letters, cards, and sketches to Wilson are at the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Edmind Wilson's all-but-indecipherable letters and cards to Powell are at the Rare Book and Manuscripts Library, Columbia University. It is possible that some additional correspondence still exists in the collection of Jacqueline Miller Rice, Powell's original executrix, who has been only partially forthcoming in relinquishing Powell-related materials.

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35 East Ninth Street
April 11, 1945

HEADQUARTERS FOR MOBILIZATION
OF THE DEAD PELVIS

Dear Bunny,

I was asked to call on Latouche,[1] who was sick in bed with strep, and there he was reading a large solemn German tome called *The Function of the Orgasm*.[2] I was particularly struck with a chapter heading called "The Mobilization of the Dead Pelvis." I decided to recruit and do my bit. Imagine my delight when I dined with the Murphys to find your friend Esther Murphy[3] there, heady with statistics and her long unmated legs flung around each other so that the left one was right and no pants on. She fixed me at once with the old beady, puffed at a cigarette butt (she is one of those smokers who are never seen with the whole cigarette but always the last eighth-inch—I believe she buys them that way) and swung right into the flaws of the Second Empire, but my horrified gaze kept being drawn to this vast length of nudity leading to what George O'Neil referred to as the Blue Grotto, where something was winking away like a Buddha's orb. This, I cried, is the Dead Pelvis at last. I am unable to work today for this haunting, grisly image. I decided she doesn't know she is female, and if she should glance down in the shower and see a set of balls she would only think—dear, dear, how dusty things get in New York.

THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT I DO NOT ADMIRE HER MIND.

I have heard no hide or hair of your family's doings so have nothing to add to your worries. We hear that Dos[4] is supposedly on his way back and that he had two or three accidents in addition to the one reported before, i.e., the airplane wing clipping him.

Your name has been coming up in reviews, mostly in reference to your detective story position.[5] Sterling North puts in as a "as Edmund Wilson has said" so your lofty pronouncements on past participles are not forgotten.

I have been whizzing along on my novel but am now in a state because George Abbott asked me if I had any play ideas around that would do for ZaSu Pitts.[6] I did have one that I had the good sense to keep from writing but sent him a few notes on it whereupon he signed a contract for it with advance payment and instructions to have it done by June 1. So here I am looking out the window over a stack of notes on a novel and then a sister stack of notes on a play. The best feature of Abbott is that he is the only person I ever met in the theater who leaves me alone and doesn't want to confer. It's the blab, blab, blab of the stage that I hate. I do not want to chum up with editors, producers, critics, Teacher or Boss in any form. That is the enemy and any pretense of equality, socially or any other way, is poppycock. I admit their right to vote and spawn, however.

Oh yes, I did see the Philip Rahvs one night in a restaurant, soon after you left, and Nathalie said she was very upset over being called to sign or testify something or other for Mary against you, and that she would not have done so if she hadn't been on the spot as she was equally fond of you.[7]

The Dwight Macdonalds[8] asked Margaret De Silver to share their home in Truro this coming summer as she was lonely, they felt, and it would be nice to have someone they could leave the children with. (She nixed this.)

Other old buddies of yours, the Herbert Solows,[9] are in Cuba for *Fortune*, studying the sugar plants, as only Herbert can.

Today the Drama Critics awarded their solid china plaque to Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* in which Laurette Taylor[10] gave a Duse-like performance of muted emotions and also unmuted ones to be on the safe side. Esther Murphy, my monitor, declares it a fine play and a great performance. It has a chance of getting the Pulitzer, too. As you know—you secretive old gossip, you—Miss Taylor's stage career

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has been checkered. Opening in plays in the past to rave notices in or out-of-town, the show closed next day because of the star's remaining in an alcoholic stupor. Choosing between the two careers she elected alcoholism and has been beavering away at it for many years.

Then Mother Love saved her. Her son Dwight a year ago took her to a doctor in Hollywood because she was disturbed about her great weight. He found the entire trouble was glandular and treated her for this condition. She thinned out, stopped drinking, opened last week to unanimous raves, wins prizes, stands on her head, is interviewed about her abstinence, declares with a *mouchoir* held to her deep tragic eyes that she only drank because her heart broke when Hartley Manners passed away, however she will have a little medicinal triple Scotch if the reporter can get the waiter fast enough because she is so emotionally upset now over the possibility of Hartley's coming to life again. Mr. [Walter] Winchell then writes mysteriously, "What famed star of what new hit has cast trembling for fear said star can't appear?" So it may be too late.

It reminds me of Shaw's sour remarks on the school of acting that based its technique on the inadvertent fumbles of a former generation of drunken actors. That is, in the old days when all actors were drunkards, the choked hoarse voice, the fumbling at the door, the lurch across the sofa, the sudden sinking into a chair were not subtle ways to express terrific emotional conflicts, but the actor's struggle to get through the act without falling down. The new actors studied this and, drinking less or not at all, adopted these drunken manifestations as proper for great emotional acting. (I cannot find this passage now and I want to fling it at Esther Murphy very soon; it is in the "Dramatic Opinions" somewhere and I must memorize it or she won't take it.) Anyway, it may be that all the praise now and in the past flung at Laurette Taylor's emotional acting may be explained this way.

Rosamond Lehmann's book got raves as literature. It seemed to me an engrossing old-time sort of "Wife in Name Only" kind of novel, about as literarily important as *Rebecca* or *Gone with the Wind*. I reviewed it this way for *PM* and imagine my fury when they cut out all disparaging remarks and in fact all points, but even so leaving it the only feeble dissenting voice. I wrote a letter advising them to pursue their practice of attacking only unsuccessful firms and writers, and buttering the big advertisers, but for God's sake stop pretending they didn't. They are always running a severe boycotting series about a little merchant down on Second Avenue who is a racketeer because he charges eight cents per wooden button when he should give them away, so please all *PM* readers don't patronize this fellow, and see that the bill for bugging your potatoes instead of worming them passes Congress, and buy *PM* tomorrow, the Only Paper that Isn't Afraid to be Afraid of saying anything. I made irreverent references in the review to the Book of the Month Club's Cholly Knickerbocker droolings over Miss Lehmann's beauty, financial and social and noble connections and said that surly subscribers would be won over at once on discovering all these points were above reproach. (I think they selected the book to retrieve their prestige after palming off a nigger writer on their club. Goodness knows, the subscribers must have cried—"I don't believe in slavery but imagine having them come into your club!"). Mr. Pippett of *PM* has tried to appease me, not for my value to *PM* but for my loud mouth and their queasy practices.

Gerald Murphy said he had a note from Scotty Fitzgerald[11] saying she had met me and was very disappointed to find my morale sagging. The only time I met her was in your office that day and I am baffled by my morale being out in those few moments. Or do you think this was Gerald's tactful way of saying something that was on his own mind?

I saw Don Elder[12] again and he seemed very pleased with your book[13] but anticipated Pa Doubleday and censor trouble, at least in Boston. This may help. Your succes-

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sors on *The New Yorker* seem spotty and that department seems disorganized so I hope you get it for next year or are you going to settle over there with Martha Gellhorn and the Talented Girls? Everybody over here is going crazy again, following the period when they were all alcoholics. It makes a nice change. Why don't you write a play, too, so as to draw fire away from my Broadway retreat?

love,
Dawn

1 The lyricist John Latouche (1917–1956) had become Powell's friend during the disastrous miscreation of the 1942 revue *The Lady Comes Across*.

2 *The Function of the Orgasm* (1927) was an unorthodox and still controversial psychological study by Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957).

3 Esther Murphy (1898–1962) was Gerald Murphy's sister. Wilson thought her remarkably brilliant.

4 The novelist John Dos Passos (1896–1970) was a close friend of Powell and Wilson.

5 Wilson's recent attack in *The New Yorker* on the vogue of the detective story, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?," had made him a figure of national controversy.

6 ZaSu Pitts (1898–1963) was an American actress, best remembered for her extraordinary performance in Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*. She appeared in Stroheim's *Hello Sister!*, an ill-fated 1931 film rendition of Powell's *Walking Down Broadway*. Abbott's plan for her to appear in a Powell play never came off.

7 Wilson was then in the midst of a violent divorce from the writer Mary McCarthy (1912–1989). Nathalie Rahv, the wife of the author and editor Philip Rahv (1908–1973), had testified that Wilson "appeared to take a delight in scolding and upbraiding his wife for petty matters."

8 The writer and social critic Dwight Macdonald (1906–1982) and his wife, Nancy, were regular visitors to Cape Cod, where both Wilson and De Silver generally spent their summers.

9 Herbert Solow (1903–1964) was an American journalist and editor, active in the fact-finding committee that investigated the Stalinist charges against Trotsky. His wife, Sylvia Salmi, was a photographer for whom Powell sat on several occasions.

10 Laurette Taylor (1887–1946) was a famous actress as a youth, and made a phenomenal comeback in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* in 1945. Williams (1911–1983) would have to wait until 1948 for his first Pulitzer, for *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

11 Frances Scott Fitzgerald, later Lanahan (1921–1986), known as "Scotty" or "Scottie," the only daughter of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald.

12 Donald Elder was a senior editor at Doubleday who worked with Wilson on the publication (and, later, on the legal defense) of *Memoirs of Hecate County*. The two fell out for a time in 1947 and Wilson left the firm.

13 *The Ballad and the Source* (1944).

35 East Ninth Street
June 4, 1945

Dear Wigmore.[1]

[. . .] It was a breath of spring to find you escaped from the book department into the wide wide world in last week's *New Yorker*. Everyone is very pleased, except possibly Mollie Panter-Downes. Philip Barry, viewed at East Hampton at the Murphys' last weekend, spoke highly of your London article—saying it was the first fresh point of view on the Situation—and in town bruised authors can smile again . . .[2]

Dos and Katie have been on hand, Dos looking not too well after his foreign travels where, it seems to me, he saw exactly what he intended to see. Katie is all chatter since her book with dear Edie and exposes her hitherto subtle hand openly now.[3] They were staying at the Murphys' last week and naturally Edie was in town and Gerald said they were phoning each other from 8 a.m. till midnight and the rest of the time locked together in the bathroom to Dos's intense embarrassment. They say the book is doing splendidly, but rumor says that the two ladies used up Dos's goodwill at Houghton Mifflin so if he should want to rest up with a little volume of verse he may find stern faces. . . .

I have lost 20 lbs. through strange assortments of pills of such a mysterious nature that they actually change the nature of my

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mind, so I was obliged to give up writing. If I don't write for five years I may make quite a name for myself and if I can stop for ten I may give Katherine Anne [Porter] and Dorothy Parker a run for their money. I did a television script for Gilbert Seldes (it was outlined from the current *Mademoiselle* magazine, so you can imagine the deep thoughts involved). The scripting itself for television is 1000 times more limiting than movie-writing since no one can move extensively on the set, and so literal and exacting that it is like a complicated game. To watch is more boring than radio and not to be compared to the old magic lantern. But the shooting is much more fascinating than a movie lot. I think the thing is a big bust —television, I mean—but then I said that about technicolor, too. (I was right.)

Bomby Hemingway[4] (Ernest's 21-year old son by Hadley) was liberated from prison and is here on leave. He had spent the night at the Murphys' on his way to visit Ernest in Cuba. His prison was the height of German efficiency, for the torture devices were very methodically arranged and suited to the Geneva rules superficially. That is, arms and legs of Allied prisoners were inevitably found infected and ordered amputated. Bomby's arm was saved only by a Polish doctor who gave him shots every week when his amputation time was due and these shots made him frightfully sick. Medical rules prohibited any surgery during fever and upchucking so he saved his arm, but is still sizzling with the drugs. Also the prisoners were given elaborate metabolism and allergy tests as soon as they came in and then carefully deprived of whatever the tests said their systems required, or else given whatever they were allergic to. It seemed a splendid example of German efficiency, with the papers all in order. . . .

Downtown New York is as depressing as ever, the only change in the routine being that Coby[5] has been on the wagon for two months due to back pains. As is usually the case, a clear head makes for seeing life in its true grisly aspect, so he is grim and literary. Also, sobriety makes one an easy prey to catastrophe. Last night as he gloomily ate a salad at Margaret De Silver's, Canby Chambers's horrible spaniel modestly chewed up half Coby's jacket. It was a new suit he had been saving up to buy for a year. No, no it didn't make a bit of difference, he laughingly assured Canby, but suddenly took a mighty swig of whiskey.

I think it must be very confusing to find yourself obliged to wave a flag and defend your native soil, as you found yourself doing in England. Maybe you will sell yourself the idea that all you want in life is a farm out next to Louis Bromfield's or a bog potato ranch in Bucks County next to George and Bea [Kaufman]. George Kaufman is in again. The theater is lousy with Pinafores. George Kaufman's *Hollywood Pinafore* is, according to report, brilliant with the master's wit and genius. Willella Waldorf, in the *Post*, raised a minor voice to say that it was not as sidesplitting as it was meant to be. Sally Benson and somebody else did the colored Pinafore *Memphis Blues* with Bill Robinson and this too is Superb. A real *Pinafore* is now hotfooting to town and it looks as if we were going to be hemmed in again by a D'Oyly Carter Nightmare. As an old Gilbert and Sullivan lover-hater, I am not happy. On Spivey's roof, *View* magazine's surrealist puppeteer is presenting skits by Jane Bowles and other self-styled avant-gardists every evening. Archie MacLeish is Not Happy in the state department and may creep out. Philip Barry is Not Happy with the Theatre Guild, now that the Guild is taking off his play. He is very discouraged about writing, having barely made a quarter of a million this season, and after all there are two mouths to feed.

Alec Brook[6] had a cover on the *SatEvePost*, being paid highly and then selling the original (a child portrait) to the parents. It seems the *Post* is following Lucky Strike and Abbott Chemicals in discovering art. . . .

I see that the *View* puppeteer's name is John Myers, the puppets are designed by Kurt Seligman, the music is by Paul Bowles, a number is by that oaf, Charles Henri

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Ford, and no doubt the check is signed by Peggy Guggenheim. . . .

With fondest regards,
Dawn

1 Powell played an on-going game with Wilson in which he was "Professor Ernest Wigmore" and she was "Mrs. Humphrey [sic] Ward."
2 Philip Barry (1896–1949) was a highly successful American playwright. Wilson had begun sending back jaundiced and rather pessimistic articles about London at the end of World War II.
3 Katy Dos Passos and her friend Edith Shay had written a novel together, *The Private Adventures of Captain Shaw* (1945).
4 John Hadley Nicanor Hemingway (1923–), Ernest Hemingway's oldest son. Powell liked and admired John Hemingway enormously.
5 Coburn "Coby" Gilman (1894–1967) was Powell's favorite drinking buddy for more than thirty years.
6 Alexander Brook (1898–1980), the American artist, was married for a time to Powell's on-again/off-again friend, Peggy Bacon (1895–1987).

35 East Ninth Street
July 3, 1947

Dear Wig old boy—

I want you to be the first to know I am having such a strange reaction to dear Mr. Perkins's[1] death that I can only describe it as psychological. In fact that is the very word. I am suddenly career-mad (not in any way overshadowing my soft feminine side) aggressive, odetsish, contacting, bigdealing, memoing, bigshotting, goingoverpeople's-heading, putthatinyourpipeandsmokeiting, as if all that had ever stood in my way before had been Mr. Perkins. I will send a telegram now to Hollywood as follows: I LAUGH UP MY SLEEVE AT WHATEVER SUM YOU MAY OFFER SIGHT UNSEEN FOR MY NEXT TOME HA HA. I jump on the editor's knee and then on his neck. I pull beards or if cleanshaven wattles. I make mountains out of motes. I am working myself up to sending cables. That is why I want you to tell me a name of a Frog publisher for me to send my works to and address if possible. Can this be arranged? Preferably a mythological character.

Everything is pursuing itself here splendidly. I met a strange Gatsby-like character at the Murphys' last week, named Dr. Hinton. He has an orchid house and a pool of tropic lilies and papyrus, a fabulous collection of Americana, he hates women due to having had a wife, and sweeps in and out of the Hamptons with a retinue of strange servants mostly stolen from the older Hampton families. Do you suppose Murphys generate Gatsbys?

I broke olives on the Brevoort terrace with Herbert Solow, now engaged in experimenting with separate life from Sylvia. He was in a dark and morose greenish mood. Joie de telaviv. I hope I don't say that. Peggy is coming in this aft and I have a fine Portuguese crackling on the hob.

best to elena and rosalind and Reuel[2]
Dawn

1 The famed Maxwell Perkins (1884–1947) had been Powell's editor for the last eight years.
2 Wilson's wife, daughter, and son, respectively.

The Cherries, NY
June 22, 1948

Dear Wig:

Why don't you write your foreign correspon-despondent nose-for-news piece on the strange life in New York as gleaned by the ads in our newspapers, such as Dr. Murray Banks and Dr. Sperling, the Sex Psychologists with dancing, coffee, Freud, Marx and bebop. The contours of these gala but dialectical sexical balls must be blueprinted in Moscow. In fact there is no iron curtain as iron as the one between the American Way of today and the accepted American idea of the American way. I am already laughing ha-ha.

I see Evelyn Waugh has done the glamour mortician[1] after Huxley but I did him first in *The Happy Island* with the concert

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pianist (broke) getting his free sleeping quarters in a Bronx funeral parlor where he practiced the organ nightly and guarded the stiffs from his own marble slab and painted the corpses with his nice artist's touch until the bereaved husbands were so seduced (what with the special temptation perfume) that they flung themselves on the coffin shrieking, "Becky, come back, I want you, do you hear, want you want you want you."

I was terribly flattered to find on my first visit to Eddie Condon's jazz house that the drummer, no less than the famed George Wettling, had a copy of my book under his arm.[2] I do enjoy the intelligentsia pretending they know a horn from a harp while the musicians pretend they know a book from a bookie. This is a very interesting place, much to my embarrassment, and the improvisations have the classic pattern of a basic creative formula. Goddam it I think I'll outclement greenberg with my aesthetic nifties.

Spivey[3] would like a profile of self for *New Yorker* and no reason why not except she is better and better known than their usual subjects, and her background and observations are more interesting. Why don't you do that? My brilliant agents asked if I would do a biography of Fanny Brice. Signed, they cried proudly. I couldn't have been more excited if it had been George Jessel or Westbrook Pegler. Shall I suggest you for this? All you do is keep out anything that might be interesting and then state that she is a good wife and mother.

Dos appeared briefly and disappeared faster.

Others beside you have spoken of the publishing family in my book being Scribners so there may be some reason for their restraint in advertising it. That's what comes of my foxily disguising a wholesale druggist dynasty and newspaper publisher family into a book family. It comes out my own publishers.

This pretty paper (called "Temptation Notes") is all there is left for me to charge at Scribner's Book Store. I've got about all the leather-edged blotters, quill pens, calling and playing cards that I can bear.

I have been asked to write "What's Wrong With the Younger Generation?" for *Harper's Bazaar*. I must find one and see what's wrong—I mean, outside of them being younger. So far this is the only future I see learing ahead. The Fight is off tonight so I don't have to go to the television party and look at it. I hate having my sport ignorance sullied. Do you think these poems are translatable? Or good? Marcelin[4] is the Canapés Verts Man and I am now so involved in my gracious offer to find him publishers that my phone rings with threats from his other friends. I see what you mean. I mean I see what Slater Brown meant with his homely motto, "Never lend a man an axe after sundown."

best to the eggnog set
Humph

1 Waugh's *The Loved One* had just been published.
2 The jazz drummer George Wettling (1907–1968) was one of Powell's admirers and she left some funny stories about him in her diaries.
3 The pianist and singer Victoria Spivey (1906–1976) was then at the peak of her career.
4 The Haitian poet and novelist Philippe Thoby-Marcelin (1904–1975), whom Powell had met during her stay in Port-au-Prince, was also a great friend to Malcolm Lowry.

September 16 (year uncertain)
PROFESSOR ERNEST WIGMORE'S TRIUMPHAL TOUR OF ALL THE AMERICAS AND MORE[1]

Not having visited the Americas (New York, Oak Bluffs and Fourth Street) since my lecture tour with Mrs. Trollop [sic] in 1814, I was prepared for certain changes but hardly for those which greeted me upon my arrival. The change, I find, lies mostly in the women, who are older than they were (mostly dark-haired though different-colored at the roots), extremely bossy though abysmally subservient to the ideas of other men. The women (contrary to the men, who dine in a body at Longchamps)

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eat at Luchow's which they pronounce through the sphenoid bone so that it comes out on your cheek instead, and spend their time "hammering their noddles for a jeste" as they call it. They are all five feet three ranging up to 140 lbs. when they begin to be five feet one and a quarter. They are found in the quarters of an invisible little people they call "husbands," who are also different-colored at the roots, laughing a good deal at the waggery of visiting lecturers found in their women's beds. This tendency to excessive merriment results frequently in what they call "dropping their choppers." I found, on questioning a Mrs. Z, that this was a compliment to their national profession which is dentistry. All American men are dentists and are paid for their work by oil paintings, gouaches, drypoints of large dogs and pastels of little girls with poor "bites." While being measured for a night-cap in a leading hattery called "Wiggins Grotto" I met what I was told was the "top drawers" of the profession. Their attitude toward the prevailing political leaders or "orthodontists" as they call them and toward artists or "plastic denturists" was characteristic of the men in all the countries I visited.

"As you say, Prof. Wigmore," was the general complaint in so many (three) words.

Streets and homes are completely emptied by nightfall which in some cases occurs as early as 11 A.M. On questioning a Mrs. Z, a woman of large "proportions" as they call them in America, I found that at this time the radicals take to the bars where in periods of unrest they plot subversive activities such as musical comedies, little magazines, Gilbert and Sullivan revivals, as well as making arrangements with each other for cornucopias (a small present given by females of any age on feast days or in moments of lethargy). These, of course, are kept in an excellent state of preservation by applications of vulcanite, novocaine and regular drilling. At national orgies or trade routs the men in full regalia present a typically primitive picture as they lock cornucopias in ceremonial dances.

I made a special point of mingling with two prominent women who, for purposes of confusion, I will call Mustard Seed and Podsnapper, to find secret customs of the sex as it exists in the Americas since Mrs. Trollop's time. These women at the time of my mingling were on what they termed the "wagon" or "merry-go-round" or "bandstand." (Ed. note: "to be on the wagon": that is, to drink in the kitchen, in the dark, behind the rose, as we put it.) It was their practice to put cheerful records on the phonograph and take turns engaging in goodnatured solo dancing during my talk. Everyplace I went I found people in tremendous unrest lulled only by opportunities to soliloquize aloud. For the most part I mingled with one person at a time, since in groups of two or more I found a careless tendency to interrupt or disagree with me, which would give my readers a wrong impression of the country.

I had the foresight to purchase a basket of the native bridgework to take home to Mrs. Trollop (who, by the way, has lived to a ripe old insolvency). She was as delighted as an old woman and donned them at once.

"Oh Urnith," thee whitthled. "Itthent America thwell?"

It was so like her.

ERNEST WIGMORE. FELLOW AM. GEOG. SOC.
BROWN UNIVERSITY CLUB

1 The circumstances behind this parody remain unclear, as does its exact date. The references to Mrs. Trollope would indicate that it was written in the late 1940s, when Powell's passion for *Domestic Manners of the Americans* was at its peak.

Paris
ca. Nov. 17, 1950

Dear Wig. . .

I just cashed my last ten dollars and was economizing on lunch at the same time disposing of—*alors*, let us say I am the Count of Monte Cristo and the world is mine, at least it feels as if somebody had bashed it

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over my ears like an old silk hat. Anyway, it would be a hangover in any other country, though in any other country what I drank would be regarded as mere civilized drinking and I wouldn't be *having* a hangover—so the waiter shortchanged me a hundred francs. With that hundred francs I could have lived like a prince for as long as I cared to in my present mood.

The mood is due to three *amer picons* with M. Jolas (who cleverly was having martinis), an Alsatian *beaucoup* wine dinner at a brasserie on Champs-Elysées with both Jolases, myself longing for less raw French meat and eternal French fried, souffléed, allumetted *pommes*—who would have dreamed that they really did have French fried potatoes in France?—and finally a delicate grog with Maria [Jolas] at Deux Maggots[1] (I never dreamed decent people went there anymore, either), Gene having left. The reason he left was my remark that Sartre was the Hopalong Cassidy of France, and he said I should be more humble before French letters, though he himself is not a Sartre admirer. I returned that this view was not—as he held—the stupid view of America toward France, but my own and based not on my brief but not brief enough stay in Paris but on Sartre as a commercial enterprise like cornflakes or Shirley Temple—that is (and he does make the trains run on time) restaurants, hotels, magazines, theatres, real estate thrive on his okay, just as our Hopalong Cassidy boots, breakfast foods, etc. Furthermore, he might be the big frog in Boston but Elyria would still believe Louis Bromfield was the country's leading mind, Carolina would be astounded to learn there was anybody but Paul Green, New Orleans would have or have had Roark Beadford, and of course there is a group that calls Ben Hecht Ben. Anyway you can see those Uncle Sam pants getting too long. . . .

Margaret probably told you Koestler came with Jim Putnam to my deportation party and gave me his wife's address then as he thought I should look her up. Maria says she's been very sick with asthma. I cannot look anybody up till my finances get more financial. I knew exactly what this would be like but rather fancied my fortunes might change with an ocean voyage.

I would like Paris better if I had any deep feeling for what they like, but I really dislike the pallid, watery-eyed, churchly old-whore sentimentality of their limpid pastoral novels—Maurois, Hemon and that school. I find Sartre's work (novels) cut-outs from Colette, Aragon, Roger-the-Thibault's-man, and every other leading novelist, and I hate the rather insanitary tidiness of the people—the newspapers folded just so, their enjoyment in all their little chores, their fixed ideas—the way the newsman is horrified that I want different newspapers every day, and more than one. "But Madame took *Le Figaro* yesterday and so she is a *Figaro* reader, how can she take *Humanité* and *Paris-Presse* too?" Also, I cannot get anyone to admit that rue Jacob is a continuation of the rue de l'Université or Boulevard des Italiens is a continuation of Boulevard des Capucines. No. These streets have nothing to do with each other. No, madame, it is not the same street under a different name, it is an entirely different street. And Fourth Avenue is *not* the lower end of Park Avenue. It is, on the contrary, completely different, in fact it leaves off at 34th Street, whereas, you must admit, Park Avenue only *begins* at 34th Street. Good God, Madame has put her stamps on the letter upside down. The Post Office will not accept. Madame must buy fresh stamps and put the blue one here, so, the red one there, so, and the other one here. This is the order in which it is done.

I do love the tiny little noises in the morning, the autos squeaking *oui oui*, the birds peeping *oui oui* and the whole hotel *oui oui*. The radios go on and I have such a good ear for language that I have picked up one favorite song I hear. It goes:

LAUNDREE—come you to me once more
Laundree—what did I pay you for
(parlando) You went away
(sing) one summer day
Occur this way, s'il vous plaît
Laundree, come sleep with me ce soir.

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Maria says Joyce's son comes in from Zurich only to get Pop's checks to drink up. She also states that many Americans who entertained Sartre and Beauvoir lavishly in America and rather expected some return favors here have been surprised to find them rather grudgingly given one cassis at de Floré café and briskly shoved off. Maria said that French were really very hospitable, only their hospitality consisted in allowing people to have as many men in their hotel as they liked or allowing them to bring their pets into restaurants.

Most people here seem irritated and surprised that America has so much war talk. However, Gene, who has been on the Frankfurt *Zeitung* for some years (now through with it) says a new war seems certain . . .

The New Yorker almost bought a story of mine but unluckily decided it would be dated by the time I had made some changes they wanted. I enjoy walking from one end of the Right Bank over bridges and under and over the Left Bank and I like the newspapers and little bakeries. I don't like the cafés because a gentlewoman can't go prancing around alone in them unless she's expecting her group, and the stores have an enormous amount of junk at high price, and in the main I think this is a good place to study to be a dope fiend. I haven't been so abysmally sunk (though I did expect it) since I was making $1000 a week in Hollywood. I have found that money does not bring happiness but neither does the lack of it. (Doesn't that have the old Gallic touch, though, my brave?)

My best (which hardly seems good enough) to Elena and Rosalind and tell the Givenses to get over here for Halloween. Tell everybody and I will meet them at the boat with my hat in my hand. (French courtesy.)

Fondly,
Dawn

35 East Ninth Street
August 27, 1954

Dear Wig—

In the night (watches of) I composed a song—

I'm sick and tired of getting drunk
Of gin I'm tired and sick
If wagons took me anywhere
I'd board one good and quick.

I hope to build this into something fine later. I hear Saroyan's cousin has a new song called "All I Want is All There Is and More." Will it ever replace "Dearie"?

I hate the pals with whom I drink
The drinks that make us pals
I'm tired of chopping ice and mint
To keep up our morales.

I thought your play reviews were provocative and rather jealous, though the *Times* was good.[1] Henrietta Holland called me to say your house was utterly wonderful.

Will I join you on the wag, you ask
But then I shake my head.
For I am so conservative and
The wagon is so red.

No, that won't do. I must search the bottle for a more felicitous climax. Things are settling down here in a most constructive way though I still worry about the outcome. It is pleasant having everybody away all summer though soon all will be rushing back to their analysts, heavy with summer guilt and tanned with insecurity. I went to another party of Liz Dunlap's and found her charming and evidently happier. Have I told you I have busied myself inventing a plastic bidet for shut-ins?

Will you and Elena be on hand for Houghton Mifflin's party on Sept. 9 here? I have not invited my closest chums as I want to feel free to fall down personally without dancing drunk-attendance.

Humph

1 Powell had much sport with the name of the famous café Les Deux Magots.

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Now I will write the music. Did you know I write the words before composing the air? Isn't that interesting? It all depends on the performer. I think it should be done by Sophie Tucker all dressed in a wittle-girl ruffly dress, hair in curls, who comes on with her wittle chair and plops it in mid stage and herself on it. She should have a couple of front teeth blacked out and maybe one eye or is that too modern? With her finger in her mouth at the same time stuffing a bean up her nose she sings this haunting little song.

At the end a dozen chorus-men pogo in on retirement pensions dragging little red wagons and throwing her from one to the other and then at the audience of whom I count you a member, leader of the clap section.

1 Wilson's collection *Five Plays* had recently been published.

May 10, 1956

Dear Wig—

I had it on my mind to ask if you are at this very minute in town with your *Waiting for Godot* tickets in hand as it is so wonderful that you should come from all over the world to see Bert Lahr in it. . . .

The Pewlitzer annozments today remind me that nonproduction is the chief requirement. Imagine Elizabeth Bishop,[1] author at 45 of about 30 dowdy little constipated poems, rewarded because she—she *what*? Well, because she is the recipient of many other prizes. In fact I believe all literary and artistic prizes are given For Industry in Conning and Copping Guggenheims and other prizes and for genteel restraint in setting foot to paper or canvas, thus relieving the judges of tiring labor. In the same way, publishers and editors and film companies pay rates according to the author's penthouses, stables, etc. How embarrassing for Zanuck to offer $5000 to David Schine,[2] for instance, for his first novel if any. What kind of Schnuck does that make Zanuck? He has the gentlemanliness to offer not what the literary property is worth but what the real estate is worth—i.e. $300,000.

I wonder if David Schine whoever he is IS writing a novel.

Have not seen Dos for some time. I have, for about two years, been getting JoJo [Powell's son] on Fridays from the sanitarium at Ward's Island for weekends to condition him for future life but last week concluded that it was merely conditioning me for Ward's instead, so I took the weekend off to see reaction all around and find faint rumblings from a beat-up brain, so may come to some decision.

Virgil Thomson's *Mother of Us All*[3] was very delightful. Don't miss *Godot*. It is the great historic triumph of the clown. The great Nordic social worker mind is always horrified that poor people (in literature, that is) laugh or mix their cancers, maggots, hunger and futility with jokes. They SHOULD beat their breasts and say I am Underprivileged and I don't Forget it, thank God. Wipe that smile off my face—

Anyway, Chekhov and Gogol knew better.

Isn't there enough unhappiness in literature without going to real life?

Humph

P.S. Dos just phones and will appear later. I fear my rude remarks about Pulitzer prizes sounds biased by never having gotten any. Is there a better bias?

1 The poet Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979) and Powell shared some friends in common, especially the artist Loren MacIver (1909–1998) and her husband Lloyd Frankenberg (1907–1975). Powell was not always so bitter about Bishop's work.

2 David Schine (1927–1996) was then notorious for his close personal association with Senator Joseph McCarthy's chief aide, the lawyer and power-broker Roy Cohn. He never published a novel.

3 *The Mother of Us All* was the second of Virgil Thomson's two marvelous operatic collaborations with Gertrude Stein.

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Tchaikovsky at the millennium

by Laura Jacobs

The overture to *Swan Lake* begins with a high F-sharp held out over a void. The tone is plaintive, isolated—a long sigh. It is on this same high, held note that Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky begins his famous "swan theme," though by the time we first hear it, at the end of act I, that tone no longer seems a sigh, but a state. This is the theme everyone hums when they hear the words *Swan Lake*, the mysterious theme that keeps trying to vault above that opening F-sharp, which it hits three more times in four measures as if the note were a spell that must be broken. Meanwhile, the melodic line, thin as incense, curls in a turmoil of metamorphosis. In a mere four measures, Tchaikovsky has sounded out the ballet: Odette is spellbound, a swan-woman trapped in perpetual transformation, ravishingly so. In a mere four measures, we have heard Tchaikovsky's genius for turning sound into silhouette, incantation into shape, seduction into soul. No wonder this theme was used as the overture for the Bela Lugosi *Dracula* in 1931. *Swan Lake* is less a fairy tale than it is that shocking blossom of romanticism: a horror story. It is a tale of doubles and doom in the manner of Hoffmann or Coleridge or Poe.

The provenance of Tchaikovsky's first ballet, premiered in 1877, is lost in the mists of time. The names that appear on *Swan Lake*'s libretto are Begichev and Geltser, but scholars question their authorship because Tchaikovsky's fingerprints are everywhere. In his superb book *Tchaikovsky's Ballets*, Roland John Wiley points to nearby sources such as a folktale by Musäus called *The Swans' Pond*, and, more compellingly, Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*, in which a white swan figures symbolically. Tchaikovsky admired *Lohengrin*, calling it "the crown of Wagner's creations."

It isn't just Wagner's opera, however, that Wiley detects in Tchaikovsky's ballet, but Tchaikovsky's own earlier operas—*Undine* (1869) and *Mandragora* (1870)—as well as his incidental music for *The Snow Maiden* (1873). All share the same scenario, the tragic love between a non-mortal woman and a mortal man. "Tchaikovsky destroyed *Undine* and abandoned *Mandragora*," writes Wiley. "It is possible that he perceived in *Swan Lake* a vehicle more satisfactory than the others to present this kind of love story, which he seemed to find so attractive." In a kind of transmutation, the love duet from *Undine* would become the act II lakeside pas de deux in *Swan Lake*.

And then there is the living-room ballet called "The Lake of the Swans," which Tchaikovsky created for family entertainments at least five years before he began work on *Swan Lake*. "The staging of the ballet was done entirely by Pyotr Ilyich," remembered Tchaikovsky's nephew Yury Lvovich Davydov. "It was he who invented the steps and pirouettes, and he danced them himself, showing the performers what he required of them . . . as he sang the

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tune." Furthermore, according to Davydov, "the principal theme—'The Song of the Swans'—was then the same as now." This is not so much a fingerprint as a potent piece of DNA.

What we know for sure is that a score like *Swan Lake*'s was utterly new to ballet. Its orchestral depth and richness, tonalities like layers of consciousness, and musico-dramatic wholeness inspired musicologists to deem it the first "symphonic" ballet. But it also contains the sinuous inner contours of opera—narrow paths, fates unfolding, voices. "Take any pas de deux," George Balanchine has said of *Swan Lake*, "their melodies are absolutely vocal." In *Swan Lake*, Tchaikovsky plumbed the singing line for mass and space, tempered it for embodiment. *Swan Lake* is the first ballet score in which we feel rapt corporeal presence, psychosexual weight. It's a ballet Freud could put on the couch and analyze.

Indeed, *Swan Lake* is a cliff-drop into sensuality, and Odette looks like no other creature in ballet. Giselle may be undead but she is never less than human. The Sylph is made of air and wing, but she was formed in man's image. Tchaikovsky's Swan Queen, however . . . well, *what is she*? Swan by day, human by night, her clock akin to the vampire's? Or is she a hybrid of man and bird, something like the Fly? Is she the Ideal as Escape? Sublimation as the Sublime? No one knows and no one need know. She is Tchaikovsky—an F-sharp tense within a melody that arches like a swan's neck, aches like a question mark. She is the sound of desire.

In Tchaikovsky's own life, desire was a subject increasingly fraught. In his definitive biography, *Tchaikovsky: The Quest for the Inner Man* (Schirmer Books, 1990), Alexander Poznansky explains that while Tchaikovsky was a confirmed and generally guilt-free homosexual, he nevertheless knew that his sexual preference made him and his loved ones vulnerable to dangerous gossip. In 1876, the year he composed *Swan Lake*, fears of blackmail, however exaggerated, were swirling in his head. He began toying with the idea of marriage, thinking a bow to convention would secure a zone of protection around his name and work. In early May 1877, less than three months after the premiere of *Swan Lake* and a few weeks before he started work on the opera *Eugene Onegin*, Tchaikovsky began courting the music student Antonina Milyukova. By the end of May he had proposed a *mariage blanc*. She accepted and married without understanding, and then expected—to his horror, despair, disgust—the real thing. It was over (unconsummated) in two months, at which point Tchaikovsky began referring to Milyukova as "the reptile."

Explaining it later, Tchaikovsky (and his biographer-peers) liked to imply that he was caught up in the heady parallels between Onegin and himself, Tatiana and Antonina. Poznansky views this as wishful thinking. There is a better parallel. *Swan Lake* is about a disastrous marriage, a prince who out of duty must wed, finds an otherworldly soulmate in the strange white swan Odette, and then mistakenly makes a vow of love to the black swan Odile, the evil, rather *reptilian*, double of Odette. It's not a perfect parallel, of course. To begin with, Tchaikovsky essentially deceived himself. But like his marriage, *Swan Lake* is a flower of his fears, the creature from his black lagoon. Tchaikovsky's twilight anxieties—a longing for resolve, a pervasive mistrust—are at home in these reeds and waters.

Swan Lake has ghoulish trappings—old stone castles, a shape-shifting villain (Von Rothbart, who takes the form of bat or owl)—but the ballet is usually produced prettily, with storybook simplicity. Last season, Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*, an import from England, plundered the sexual subtext and became a pop phenomenon with an extended run on Broadway. Recasting *Swan Lake* with a gender twist, Bourne turned up the gothic high dudgeon, giving us a story of sexual hysteria set in Buckingham Palace. The prince—love-starved, hungry for something—ends in madness, a sort of self-immolation by swan.

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Bourne's *Swan Lake* is not a ballet. It is a giddy piece of theater masquerading as dance, which places it, for me, outside the realm of real *Swan Lakes*. In the manner of Mark Morris's *The Hard Nut*, which set *The Nutcracker* in an acidic Sixties suburb, Bourne's production updates *Swan Lake* (party dances are the Twist and the Frug, though the Queen Mum still wears Dior silhouettes from the Fifties). The staging is impressive, continuously clever, with the overscaled prop from one scene gliding and revolving to unlock the next scene, like objects floating through a dream retold. And in the lakeside "white acts," Bourne makes the story his own. Act II is a London park —all white plaster surrealism, very Cecil Beaton in *Vogue*—a gay wink. Act IV is a white straitjacket in a white room—shock-therapy apotheosis.

The big gimmick in this production is that the swans are danced by bare-chested men in woolly (why not feathers?) white bloomers and punk makeup. Odette might be thought of as a Mapplethorpian orchid, a multi-cult "Other," while Odile is rough trade in black leather—a bisexual threat. For a while, the spectacle of powdered pecs and powerful arms is fascinating—the male weight rocks the score like an overloaded boat. And always, when a stage is full of raw young guys moving as one, there is that communal, feral thrill in the audience—a cheap thrill, but potent in its moment. The point where the choreography should be most inventive, however—the swans—is where invention falls away. Bourne had deftly cut the score elsewhere, but it sounds as if he's used every last drop of the white acts. This leaves a lot of time to see that his swan steps are modern-dance pastiche, mostly waist-up and heavily repetitive. The erotic charge quickly goes flat—"okay, flap-flap, boy swans." The strangeness is not where it should be, in the steps.

I admit to a gut reaction against Bourne's vision of the swan as male. Yes, there is a rush in the score dynamic enough to support masculine muscle. But Bourne's *Swan Lake* does not, cannot, sing. Tchaikovsky understood ballerinas, and was known to do fair imitations of them. His feathery orchestrations speak to slim female ankles and delicate wrists. His slides up the scale beg for the trill of finger turns and pirouettes on pointe. And his adagios, like a soprano's arias (that F-sharp is soprano range), are at one with the lengthening of line made possible by women's pointe work and deep plié (men do not lift any higher than demi-pointe, nor do they articulate plié with as much roundness and refinement). Lev Ivanov, choreographer of the 1895 Maryinsky white acts that have remained the template for stagings ever since, responded to Tchaikovsky with metaphors—shapes that nest in space, steps *en tournant* in which the two-sided spell (day/night) seems to reverberate *ad infinitum*. Bourne's muscle-beach birds have not the existential poetry of women —the corps as state of grace or moaning mass grave.

Still, conventional *Swan Lake*'s are harder and harder to sit through. Clichés of staging have grown thick and predictable (all those pleasant peasants), the national dances look tediously rote, and no one seems to know what to do with that storm-swept act IV where Tchaikovsky, lashing toward death and transcendence under a rising astral canopy, overwhelms most attempts at staging (Bourne's best stroke was his imploding finale—he makes it an electrical brainstorm, horror-story hyperbole). Regarding Odette, today's ballerinas think they know her—they think she is a white tutu, a flutter of arms, a tragic face. You no longer feel them sinking into her arched-back attitudes as into abyss, the way Natalia Makarova used to do. You no longer feel them plunged into that sacrificial plastique, the coursing arabesques and imperious *soutenus*. Eloquently helpless, sadistically enchanted, sullied yet pure—Odette is like Garbo's throat, a place or grace that is beyond the pale of today's gen-X female imagination. She is a daughter of adagio, that magisterial elaboration of line which, in its continuous pull between arrest and movement, builds a monument

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to emotion. In scoring Odette's themes for the reedy oboe, Tchaikovsky was clear about the struggle on his mind—she is sucked down by the marshes even as she reaches for the moon.

Odile comes easier. She's a power bird—a bravura performance of sharp attack and freer plastique. In his *Swan Lake* of 1951, George Balanchine was right to dispense with the court, the plot, the national dances. "I remember when *Swan Lake* was performed at the Mariinsky Theater," he told Solomon Volkov in *Balanchine's Tchaikovsky*, "*no one ever understood anything!*" [His italics!] Balanchine elided acts II and IV into a fantasia of *Swan Lake*, dropping the ballerina into a blue current that swept her up and away.

What would he have thought of last spring's *Swan Lake* at New York City Ballet? Probably what everybody thought: "Why?" As part of the company's fiftieth anniversary season, it read like a non sequitur—it was everything Balanchine had attempted to forego with his own concentrated version. Coming on the heels of Bourne's *Swan Lake*, with its theatrical brio, its full-frontal eros, Peter Martins's production looked dispassionate, flat—no sex drive at all. It's as if Martins were playing his own version of the prince, forced by duty into a loveless marriage with *Swan Lake*.

There isn't much good to say about the production. Per Kirkeby's sets were minimal suggestions of place, and the few props—a crossbow on a pillow, a throne—had the bright, static look of icons on a computer screen. While the lakeside acts were blue-gray Silly String abstractions, act III, a looming wood-paneled room, could have been office space for a CEO. Around Ivanov's heated duets and solos, Martins supplied the kind of cold, fast, dancers-in-endless-lines-of-four choreography he does to the music of Michael Torke and Charles Wuorinen.

Into this empty exercise came the company's unprepared Odette-Odiles. Some tried squeezing into the swan's introverted, curve-on-curve plastique (Monique Meunier kept popping out of it, as if her stays wouldn't hold). Others sort of skimmed along the top, connecting the solos. What else could they do? You can't just put on that tutu and be Odette in a full-length production. It takes layers of commitment—emotional, technical, communal—to the style and the story. The style *is* the story. But it's just an outline to these women, not in their tradition. You can see they don't know how to make it theirs, and consequently they have no love for it. In fact, Martins actually choreographed this *Swan Lake* for the Royal Danish Ballet, where it was premiered a year ago. Why it was deemed appropriate for the New York City Ballet is a mystery not of the lakeside, but the board room.

The Sleeping Beauty, Tchaikovsky's second ballet, is also about a marriage, also fixed on the continuation of the royal line—but what a different marriage it is. Premiered in 1890, thirteen years after *Swan Lake*, *Beauty* is like day to *Swan Lake*'s night. You hear the difference at once, in the overtures. Where *Swan Lake* is a lone voice floating in darkness, *Sleeping Beauty* begins in discourse: the ripping cry and kettledrum rumble of the furious fairy Carabosse is answered and subdued by the calm breeze and harp glissandos of the Lilac Fairy. Where *Swan Lake*'s overture builds with the throb of obsession, in *Beauty* we experience the social fabric—torn, then mended—of the true fairy tale. It's difficult not to feel an almost ontological force at work in these two scores. *Swan Lake* sounds like a ballet conceived in mist and composed in isolation. *Beauty* is the blossom of a close, committed, and well-documented collaboration between Tchaikovsky and the masters of the Mariinsky Ballet—the director Ivan Vsevolozhsky and the choreographer Marius Petipa. In short, *Sleeping Beauty* is a marriage of like minds.

The idea was Vsevolozhsky's. He was keen on a collaboration between Tchaikovsky, Petipa, and himself, but his first proposal, *Undine*, didn't interest Tchaikovsky (who may have felt he'd been-there-done-

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that). The scenario Vsevolozhsky prepared from Charles Perrault's *La Belle au bois dormant*, however, charmed the Francophile in all three men (though French, Petipa thought himself a Russian artist). "I want to do the *mise en scène* in Louis XIV style," Vsevolozhsky wrote. "Here one could let one's musical fantasy run wild and compose melodies in the spirit of Lully, Bach, Rameau, etc." It would be a sumptuous production, a *ballet-féerie* set in Versailles. But more than that, *Beauty* would be a supreme integration of aesthetic affinities—musical, theatrical, epochal—with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ideals recapitulated in nineteenth-century forms, and lyric flight (the troubadour's rose) absorbed into classical amplitude (the Baroque sunburst). Beginning in the era of Louis XIV, the Sun King, and ending in the clouds of Apollo, the Sun God, the ballet is framed in light, and offers an implicit, flattering portrait of Russia's Czar Alexander III who was footing the bill. Implicit as well was a bold territorial statement: *Beauty* suggests it was the Russian Ballet—not French—that was now "continuing the line" of classical dance.

Petipa wrote up a detailed choreo-musical libretto (in the Vision Scene coda, for example, he wants "music with mutes—a 2/4 as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*"), and Tchaikovsky responded with a masterpiece that is its own dreaming kingdom, a score not easily altered or rearranged. Tchaikovsky's light touch shows the influence, not of Lully, but of Delibes's *Coppélia* and *Sylvia*, ballets Tchaikovsky had come to know only after he wrote *Swan Lake*. And he'd made another adjustment. Gone, the *sturm und drang* of Wagner; the operatic model for *Beauty* is the self-contained, human-scaled, witty, and forgiving opera of Tchaikovsky's god, Mozart. In *Beauty*, sensuality is not dangerously concentrated in one being (like Odette in *Swan Lake*), it is in the order of the material world, touching all things. Tchaikovsky's score—the rapture of its orchestral colors, the splendor of its suspension-bridge structure, its melodies like lush brocades and long vistas—is a realm where characters fall and grow, where the senses graduate into sensibility. *The Sleeping Beauty* is an Enlightenment ballet.

For Wiley, the score makes brilliant choices tantamount to a philosophical statement. In *Swan Lake*, keys are locked in opposition, searching in vain for resolution. But in *Beauty*, the principal keys "have no commanding interrelationship beyond their compatibility with the key of resolution [G]," to which all these keys lead. Furthermore, "In *Sleeping Beauty*, Tchaikovsky chooses E minor and E major to portray the malevolent and benevolent aspects of Aurora's destiny, personified by Carabosse and the Lilac Fairy . . . they are quite different, yet in some respects the same." Good and evil, life and death, E-ternally bound: this, too, is in the order of things. Such balances in the story and the score—embodied in Aurora's famous balances in the Rose Adagio—make *Beauty* the lyric expression of a cherished hope: that good does subdue evil, that humankind will always right itself. This is why *Beauty* is beloved, why that first production bound so many young artists —Anna Pavlova, Leon Bakst, and later George Balanchine—to ballet. In *Sleeping Beauty,* civilization is an art, and art, a civilization. This is why the Royal Ballet's *Beauty* of 1946, with Margot Fonteyn as Aurora, had such a profound impact. After so much death, it looked like dawn.

But what did the first *Sleeping Beauty* look like? You can imagine the excitement among balletomanes when it was learned that the Kirov Ballet, now under the direction of Makhar Vasiev, was reconstructing the 1890 *Beauty*. Memories of a *Beauty* the company brought to New York in 1989 had, for me, dwindled to a felt hat with a curling feather, a vine-covered scrim, a slow evening of powder-pastels. That was a *Beauty* of patchy provenance, a long way and a few revolutions from Vsevolozhsky and Petipa, though compared to shiny American *Beauty*s the old-world dustiness had charm. This new—or rather, new-old—*Beauty* was the result of a chance comment the American

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scholar Tim Scholl made to Vaziev: "Have you seen the Sergeyev notes?" He was referring to the extensive notations that Nikolai Sergeyev had made of Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty* at the beginning of the century, notations that were asleep in the Harvard Theatre Collection. (A second Sergeyev—Konstatin—ran the Kirov from the 1950s through the 1970s, and made his own changes to *Beauty* in those years.)

For a blow-by-blow story of the restoration, go to *Ballet Review* (Spring 1999), where the mapping and weighing of Nikolai Sergeyev's notes, the matching of his steps and floor plans against old memories and even older *Beauty*s, is fascinating aesthetic detective work. Meanwhile, the reports from visitors to Russia were raves. There was also backstage politics. Russian dancers, traditionally, don't like to try new things—even new-old things. The senior dancers didn't like this *Beauty* (because it wasn't their *Beauty*), and the younger dancers didn't like the wigs. The long blonde Louis Quinze curls Prince Désiré wears in act II almost bit the dust when one dancer refused to wear them (he relented, when the other dancer cast as prince said *he'd* wear the wig). At the end of June, the Kirov Ballet of the Mariinsky Theatre unveiled its restored *Sleeping Beauty* at the Met.

The first chills came with the first strokes of the overture. Under the baton of Gianandrea Noseda, the Kirov Ballet Orchestra tore into Tchaikovsky—swift, fierce, ascendant—taking full possession of the music not by right of long lineage, but by the feline vigor and acute sensitivity with which it inhabited Tchaikovsky's world of sounds. This wasn't going to be one of those stately *Beauty*s. In seconds, the audience was sitting up straighter—all the better to see the sights.

The lovely sepia-tint archival photos in the souvenir program—Aurora in amber—simply didn't prepare you for the clash of colors when the curtain went up: yellows, violets, turquoise, emerald green (later, chlorine green in the Vision Scene), not to mention gold and silver, pearls and embroideries, sashes and plumes. The artist Alexander Benois, there at the beginning, thought the combination of costume colors garish, and it is—vibrantly, vibratingly. We are now so conditioned to seeing color-coordinated productions of the classics, so used to equating authenticity or relevance with a homogenized façade, we feel adrift when we don't get that façade (and then vaguely disappointed when we do). The life force of these colors was a revelation—and not lost on the crowd.

The sets stick with Vsevolozhsky's plan of Versailles-like courts, bedchambers, gardens, and forests. But within architectural backdrops full of ornate play—*trompe-l'oeil* vaults and niches—Vsevolozhsky had a field day with the costumes. The corsetted, bustled, *tapissier* (upholsterer) style of the contemporary couturier Charles Worth (who had dressed Empress Eugénie) is used for the Lilac Fairy's act II costume and Princess Aurora's wedding gown—linking them in divine right, and also keeping them fashionably up-to-date (the other court ladies are back with Louis in abbreviated panniers.) And what about those red-and-white striped tights like gondola poles—stripes everywhere!—and the explosion of plackets and pom-poms? Tim Scholl has noted that St. Petersburg connoisseurs were, at the time, under the spell of the *commedia dell'arte*. Vsevolozhsky mixed fantasy and fact, centuries and styles, with the cheek of Diana Vreeland.

Four hours long, this *Beauty* flies by. It is divided into four short acts with three intermissions, as American Ballet Theatre's currently is. Yet it never feels heavy, as ABT's does. One of the glories of this production is its easy sense of time. Petipa opens the prologue with pageantry and pantomime, taking special care to make relationships clear. He's telling the story, and the dances that follow simply open that story to the atmosphere. When the fairies promenade in with their entourages, the party begins. When the fairies dance, a magic, almost psychedelic, garden is born onstage. This

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swing between forms of expression makes for a metaphysical balance, a luxurious pace (a magical mystery tour!) that's never slow.

This marvelous pace allows us time to use our eyes, to see more. For instance, I love the way the solo of the Wheat Flour Fairy is followed, of course, by the Breadcrumbs Fairy—who has mice appliquéd on her tutu, wanting their share of crumbs. Who's next, but a bird, the Canary Fairy. In Vsevolozhsky and Petipa's kingdom, even the crumbs connect. And when the big bad fairy Carabosse storms the party, moving with hump-backed menace, it's a black cat that adorns her cape. The cat-and-mouse in the costumes is just another of the eternal circles in this *Beauty*.

On a deeper level, the material richness of the production connects with one of its primary choreographic metaphors—not the image of the rose, central to the ballet and redolent of Aurora, but its sister image, the spindle. Both spiral around a stem or axis, both have sharp points—both evoke a ballerina up on pointe. But where the rose suggests one, the spindle suggests the interweaving, the interdependence, of many. And like a sewing needle appearing and disappearing in cloth, the idea of the point—not only its danger, but its power—keeps flashing in this *Beauty*, reiterated in its props: knitting needles, the Lilac Fairy's silver sword, Prince Désiré's arrow. Everyone, the production seems to say, has a point.

Petipa put ample space around his pointes. In one of the production's striking reversions, the Lilac Fairy's big solo in the prologue no longer consists of those grand, horizon-like leg sweeps that no one can quite do these days. Instead, it's a series of beautifully modeled passes which, once you get used to it, is more syntactically compatible with Aurora's solos, their Singer sewing machine verticality and precision, their *piqué* (pricked) footwork. More interesting still, is Petipa's continual return to attitude *en avant*, the leg hooked in front of the body. He uses it again and again, usually angled *croisé*, so much that it becomes as important as the *attitude derrière*—the pose of Mercury that is Aurora's signature pose and the iconic focus of productions ever since. *Attitude en avant* acts as a little gate to the stage, a thorn-like protection of Tchaikovsky's kingdom (surely these attitudes were an influence on Frederick Ashton). It also presents the pointe on a pillow of air.

If the body's rise and fall is fixed in the pointed toe, pantomime and dance meet in the pointed finger. It is employed everywhere in Petipa's *Beauty*—by the fairies for sculptural finish; by Carabosse to spell fate; by Aurora to show her wound; and by Lilac, tapped against her forehead, to say "Think." This *Beauty* passes from fingertip to fingertip to fingertip, a golden thread of artistic impulse and inspiration.

Of the many adorable touches in this *Beauty*, one stands out. At the end of the prologue, having cast the spell of death on Aurora—only to have it softened by Lilac—Carabosse is leaving. As her carriage pulls away, all the fairies and courtiers crowd after her, their backs to the audience, all wagging a finger high in the air. Writing in *The New York Times*, Anna Kisselgoff sniffed, "It is hard to believe that Petipa would have the King and the entire court waving a finger at Carabosse." Is it? I find it hard to believe that this thrilling moment, so poetically true to the texture of the whole, so palpably Petipa, so dear, was ever allowed to go missing. "It will not be," they seem to say, and there is no moment in all of ballet so full of its own unity. By the way, in his detailed research on the first production, Wiley comes to the prologue's end and writes, "All present threaten Carabosse."

How does the Kirov look in this *Beauty*? Like the dancers understand it, despite their qualms. They perform mime with such largesse, it makes you happy. You feel the shape of the story fitting large inside the ballet—a sort of silent-movie scale—and it's utterly involving, especially today, when stories are no longer shown or told, just implied, assumed. Perhaps another circle is coming around. With the sensations of robo-dancer speed and flexibility becoming

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ever more thin and undifferentiated, it is human rhythm that looks new and fresh.

As for Aurora, ever since the touchstone performances of Margot Fonteyn, and later the Kirov's Irina Kolpakova and Alla Sizova, critics have looked to this role as privileged and definitive, and also as an indicator of company health—Aurora as annual report. Given the symbolisms in the ballet, it's tempting to view the role this way, but it can mar one's enjoyment of *Beauty*. A born Aurora—a bright future—doesn't come along every day. It's well to remember that St. Petersburg balletomanes thought the first Aurora, Italian ballerina Carlotta Brianza, a "little brown imp." This production made me see *Beauty* as the ensemble work it is—the little kingdom that is every classical ballet company.

The Kirov is currently in a youthful phase, with a batch of new ballerinas fresh out of the gate. Svetlana Zakharova had opening night. Long, slim, exceedingly flexible, with a smiling porcelain-doll face, she's the company ingenue. Zakharova's tendency toward trick extensions, legs flipped up mindlessly high, can make her gauche, but her upper body, the curvaceous modeling of her head, shoulders, and back, is lyric. Diana Vishneva's Aurora was deeper, plummier, more musically aware and daring (even impulsive; there's a touch of wildness in Vishneva). The way she arched soulfully sideways to drop her handful of roses—echoing, one critic noted, the handle of a basket—was Russian poetry and an example of the unusually soft finish she likes to put on a phrase (later in the week, her act II in *Giselle* was softness-on-softness, again, with daring musical accents like jags of unbound energy). Altynai Asylmuratova had the matinee, not quite the place for the woman who was the company princess only ten years ago. But ten years can be a lifetime in ballet. She is weaker in the lower body (which was never technically strong), but above, majestic, poised. She is harder, with a snap of sell on her finishes, but also absolutely clear, showing the social flow of Aurora's attentions. Her arabesque is still mighty, and now weighty—it centers her in the story. And makes her moving.

When asked why the company took on this restoration of *The Sleeping Beauty*, Sergei Vikharev, the dancer who restaged it, told *Ballet Review*, "It's not a question of whether the current [Konstantin Sergeyev] version suits us or not, but of what is now called *The Sleeping Beauty* at the Mariinsky. Does it have anything to do with Tchaikovsky or Petipa? Should the Theater even use their names in its programs?" Self-questioning at the Kirov? This is an amazing development. So too the company's dancing of Balanchine, as it showed in its all-Balanchine evenings at the Met. Not only was he performed without petulance, but faster, looser, lighter, and, in the dancing of Uliana Lopatkina in *Symphony in C*, phrased (good god!), *embraced* in phrasing. It was the second movement new-minted—and in the *penchée*, no tacky nose touched to knee, but measure, breath, a rose opening. A complete surprise from this usually steely ballerina, the performance made one, for the first time, think: *They have all of Balanchine before them*.

And they have Tchaikovsky, which is everything.

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Derek Mahon: exile & stranger

by Richard Tillinghast

Ireland over the past few decades has been the breeding ground for a dozen or so notable poets. One of them, Seamus Heaney, has become world-renowned, and rightly so. But equally worthy of attention is Derek Mahon, born in 1941, two years later than the Nobel Laureate. He has not been, until recently, especially prolific: his carefully winnowed *Selected Poems* (1991, now out of print) contains most of the essential early Mahon; his two most recent individual volumes, *The Hudson Letter* (1995) and *The Yellow Book* (1997),[1] are fresh, witty, and often coruscating, at once classic and demotic.

Like Heaney, Mahon was born and raised in Northern Ireland. Unlike his more celebrated contemporary, he is city-bred—a native of Belfast—and he is culturally a Protestant. While Heaney attended Queens University in Belfast, Mahon went south to Dublin, where he studied at Trinity College, then on to the Sorbonne. Heaney left the North for residence in Dublin and professorships at Harvard and Oxford, but his work is justly noted for its rootedness in the rural world of his childhood. Mahon has lived outside Ireland for years at a time, working in London as a journalist and screenwriter.

During his London years he was variously theater critic for *The Listener*, poetry editor of the *New Statesman*, and features editor at *Vogue*. His career in England somewhat parallels that of his poetic mentor, Louis MacNeice, also a northern Protestant who was a producer in London for the BBC. Mahon has been active as a translator from French—Nerval, Villon, and others—as well as from classical texts. His versions of *The School for Wives* and *The School for Husbands* (retitled *High Time*) have been mounted on the Dublin stage. For several years in the 1990s his home base was New York City, where he lived in the West Village, taught at New York University, and wrote *The Hudson Letter*. The poet he most resembles may be W. H. Auden. Like Auden, and Joyce, Beckett, and MacNeice, Mahon has led a life of exile and estrangement. By 1996, though, he had returned to Dublin to live in the "attic flat" he mentions in *The Yaddo Letter* (1992), above "the damp gardens of Fitzwilliam Square."

A pandemic flaw of American poetry, inherited from Whitman, is a determination to make the grand gesture, to exhibit the monumentality exemplified by *Leaves of Grass*. Celebrating one's soul all too often leads to windbaggery. And recently we have been plagued by a fuzzy mysticism not far removed—though its practitioners would not appreciate the comparison—from the sentimental vapors of late Victorian verse. Here are some lines culled more or less at random from the *American Poetry Review* of January/February 1997, taken from "Gladly

1 *The Hudson Letter*; Wake Forest University Press, 63 pages, $8.95. *The Yellow Book*; Wake Forest University Press, 57 pages, $9.95.

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Though I Lost It and Knew I Would" by Alice Notley:

> . . . I say, Help me write, to the words
> and the words say, Here are the words
> because the words love me and not you
> I found them where there was much less abuse
> in this dark and electric light-sea
> no-water sea of much salt blown in freely
> for sagacity and pain-in-wound and drying up
> light's drying up he's almost overstayed his
> term of abuse.

By contrast, Mahon's work is reticent, witty, and bracingly hard-edged. Most refreshingly he does not attempt the *de rigueur* transcendental moment at the end of a poem, where most American writers feel called upon to hit high C. Few poets on these shores would close a poem, as simply as Mahon closes "A Lighthouse in Maine":

> You turn a corner and
> There it is, shining
> In modest glory like
>
> The soul of Adonis.
> Out you get and
> Walk the rest of the way.

The plainspokenness, the unraised voice, are quite in keeping with the look of the lighthouse in its New England setting.

"Afterlives," dedicated to the Ulster poet James Simmons and announcing "I am going home by sea/ For the first time in years," comments on the civil strife in the northern province: "the faith does not die// That in our time these things/ Will amaze the literate children/ In their non-sectarian schools." The relation in which Mahon stands to the city of his birth is essayed tentatively and bemusedly:

> And I step ashore in a fine rain
> To a city so changed
> By five years of war
> I scarcely recognize
> The places I grew up in,
> The faces that try to explain.
> But the hills are still the same
> Grey-blue above Belfast.
> Perhaps if I'd stayed behind
> And lived it bomb by bomb
> I might have grown up at last
> And learnt what is meant by home.

Two notes glancingly struck here—the northern landscape and the occluded hint of personal distress—I shall briefly comment on later. But the first thing I notice is Mahon's handling of the verse. If, within the insular (or, to use the poet's own formulation, "era-provincial") world of late twentieth-century American practice, to praise a poet for technical expertise sounds like faint praise, it only proves how far and how damagingly our poetry has drifted from its traditional moorings in the simple but hard-to-achieve act of writing well. Ezra Pound says somewhere that technique is proof of sincerity. Only those who have made the effort can know how difficult it is to produce an epigrammatic bombshell like the last, seven-line iambic pentameter stanza of "Knut Hamsun in Old Age," which challenges a high-flown assertion of Yeats's:

> One fortunate in both would have us choose
> "Perfection of the life or of the work."
> Nonsense, you work best on a full stomach
> As everybody over thirty knows—
> For who, unbreakfasted, will love the lark?
> Prepare your protein-fed epiphanies,
> Your heavenly mansions blazing in the dark.

For readers whose knowledge of the techniques of verse is rusty, it might be well to point out Mahon's use of both full- and half-rhymes here to bind the stanza together: choose/knows/epiphanies; work/lark/dark. But what about "stomach"? Does that partially rhyme with "work/lark/dark," or is it a free-floater like "war," "recognize" and "behind" in the passage I quoted from "Afterlives"? Mahon's patent mastery of rhyme and meter allows him to leave some rough edges, some informalities of technique.

An essential if unspoken requirement for poetry in rhyme and meter is that it must

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sound natural. Yeats has the last word on the subject: "A line will take us hours maybe;/ Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,/ Our stitching and unstitching has been naught." There is a distinct contrast between the rough edges visible in the verse of masters like Yeats, Auden, MacNeice, Heaney, and Mahon, and today's young converts to "form" who set great store by following the rules.

It is instructive to see how Mahon puts a poem together. "Day Trip to Donegal" at first seems to be a straightforward narration of an excursion to the wild maritime county mentioned in the title: "We reached the sea in early afternoon,/ Climbed stiffly out. There were things to be done,/ Clothes to be picked up, friends to be seen." Mahon's account of the trip clips right along; typically he wastes little time setting the scene and providing atmosphere. This narrative economy sets his poems apart from those of Heaney, who describes places atmospherically and spends more time evoking the sense of place.

Here is how Mahon describes Donegal: "As ever, the nearby hills were a deeper green/ Than anywhere in the world, and the grave/ Grey of the sea the grimmer in that enclave." The famous greenness of the Irish landscape stands in contrast here to versions of that color elsewhere; the poem assumes that the reader is, like the poet himself, from somewhere else. Mahon paints the sea's greyness not in terms of color value, but morally, in terms of its grimness. When the party leaves Donegal, the drive back is rendered crisply, in a six-line stanza made up of three couplets:

> We left at eight, drove back the way we came,
> The sea receding down each muddy lane.
> Around midnight we changed-down into
> suburbs
> Sunk in a sleep no gale-force wind disturbs.
> The time of year had left its mark
> On frosty pavements glistening in the dark.

From the blowsy soul-celebrations and philosophical maunderings found in much contemporary American poetry, one turns to sharp-edged verse like this with relief and delight. "Give me a ring, goodnight, and so to bed. . ." the evening ends. And what is the aftermath of this little excursion? A disturbing dream-image takes us by surprise:

> At dawn I was alone far out at sea
> Without skill or reassurance—nobody
> To show me how, no promise of rescue—
> Cursing my constant failure to take due
> Forethought for this; contriving vain
> Overtures to the vindictive wind and rain.

The bad dream is the flip-side of the liberating Donegal landscape and seascape. The aesthetic that Yeats frames in "The Fisherman" comes to mind: he sought to write a poem, he says, "as cold and passionate as the dawn." The wild, exhilarating impact of the previous day's experience has changed, by morning, to desolation. The use of generalized attributes, "skill or reassurance," is apt in context. Nothing more specific feels called for.

By choice an exile like Auden, Mahon shares with him a tense awareness of writing in a time of crisis, of shouldering the responsibility to speak publicly on pressing issues of the day. In the last stanza of his elegy "In Carrowdore Churchyard," subtitled "at the grave of Louis MacNeice," are found these Audenesque phrases that bring the natural and personal worlds together with the res publica: "From the pneumonia of the ditch, from ague/ Of the blind poet and the bombed-out town you bring/ The all-clear to the empty holes of spring."

Mahon shares MacNeice's fatalism, lacking the early Auden's hopefulness that we may eventually be able cure our many inherent ills. He would never issue an Audenesque bromide like "We must love one another or die." If his frequent attempts to grapple with the roots of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and with other issues fail to offer solutions, at least they convince the reader of their genuineness, often expressed in the form of a disclaimer:

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I who know nothing
Scribbling on the off-chance,
Darkening the white page,
Cultivating my ignorance.

In Ireland, with its layers of history and prehistory, the modern observer often feels like an archaeologist. One of Mahon's consistent concerns is the contrast between Ireland's violent, heroic past and its modern, ordinary present. Mahon's "Glengormley," which takes its title and setting from a middle-class suburb of Belfast, contemplates this contrast. Mahon is at his poised, satirical best, effortlessly encompassing broad expanses of cultural history.

Wonders are many and none is more
wonderful than man
Who has tamed the terrier, trimmed the hedge
And grasped the principle of the watering can.
Clothes-pegs litter the window-ledge
And the long ships lie in clover; washing lines
Shake out white linen over the chalk thanes.

"Now we are safe from monsters," the poem goes on to say. The saints and heroes of earlier days are gone.

And much dies with them. I should rather
praise
A worldly time under this worldly sky—
The terrier-taming, garden-watering days
Those heroes pictured as they struggled
through
The quick noose of their finite being. By
Necessity, if not choice, I live here too.

Given his cosmopolitan stance, his generalizing rhetoric, and the urban setting of many of his poems, it comes as something of a surprise that Mahon responds so keenly to the natural world. Nature is not at the center of his vision, as it has been in Irish poetry for centuries, but it turns up here and there, and always delightfully. He has a particular appreciation for the limestone-bedded, deforested littoral landscape:

Out there you would look in vain
For a rose bush; but find,
Rooted in stony ground,
A last stubborn growth
Battered by constant rain
And twisted by the sea-wind.

There are no pastoral escapes in this realist's world, but neither is the freshness of birds and flowers denied. Here, from "Ford Manor," is a little house near London that retains its saving remnant of natural life even when dominated by reminders of industrial civilization:

Even on the calmest nights the fitful
prowl of planes is seldom still
where Gatwick tilts to guide them home
from Tokyo, New York or Rome;
yet even today the earth disposes
bluebells, roses and primroses,
the dawn throat-whistle of a thrush
deep in the dripping lilac bush.

The thrush singing in the lilac bush comes across as vividly as any natural image from the world of haiku. The musicality of rhythm and rhyme enhance the poem's lyricism. The varied rhyming of these couplets is the work of someone with an extraordinary ear. The way the unaccented second syllable of "fitful" rhymes with the accented "still" creates a subtle rhythm, avoiding the clunky effect sometimes produced when two monosyllables rhyme fully. The same music occurs with "disposes/primroses"; since the accent of the latter comes on the first syllable, the rhyme achieves a nicely floating effect sometimes referred to by students of prosody as "hovering accent." Finally the slight difference in vowel sounds between "thrush" and "bush" adds to the delicacy of the thrush singing in the lilac right after the rain.

The Hudson Letter, a poetic sequence published in 1995 against a personal background of alcoholism, divorce, and writer's block—to which his recourse to translation was probably a response—represents a rebirth for Derek Mahon. The iambic pentameter

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couplets are more brilliant than ever, and there's a wonderful lightness of spirit in the lines. Even the *cri de coeur*, "Oh, show me how to recover my lost nerve!" sounds like the exclamation of someone who has already accomplished that recovery. Whatever lapses he has recovered from, in this book he is clearly back on his feet again. This is a jaunty Mahon, delighting in life in New York City:

> The lights go out along the Jersey shore
> and, as Manhattan faces east once more,
> dawn's early light on bridge and water-tower,
> Respighi's temperate nightingale on WQXR
> pipes up though stronger stations throng
> the air,
> a radio serendipity to illustrate
> the resilience of our lyric appetite
> carnivalesque or studiously apart—
> on tap in offices, lofts and desperate 'hoods
> to Lorca's "urinating multitudes"
> while I make coffee and listen for the news
> at eight, but first the nightingale. Sing, Muse.

Passages like this, good-humoredly satirical and inspired by the life of the metropolis, illustrate poetry's power to celebrate the quotidian, suffusing it with a sense of quiet joy. An observer overlooking the street bears interested witness as

> out of the blue,
> "out there," under the fire-escape, some
> psycho
> sends up a stream of picturesque abuse
> directed, evidently, at my 4th-floor window,
> his reasoning trenchant, complex and
> abstruse—

Or later, "Dawn; the kick-start as some heroine/ draws on her gloves for the Harley-Davidson dream trip/ to Provincetown, Key West or Sunset Strip." These cadences are at least as old as the urban poetry of Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, but how freshly they render the energies of Manhattan!

The Hudson Letter may be seen as an interlude, since the sequence removes Mahon from his regular stamping grounds in Belfast, Dublin, and London. Still, since New York is to some extent the creation of Irish immigrants, it's as much the Irish poet's turf as anyone else's. A versified letter from one Bridget Moore to her mother in Cork puts the experiences of this recent Irish emigré in historical perspective:

> I get each Sunday off and use the privilege
> to explore Broadway, the new Brooklyn
> Bridge
> or the Statue of Liberty, copper torch on top
> which, wd. you believe it, actually lights up.

It would hardly work, however, to place Derek Mahon among the "huddled masses." Though his humanity is large enough to include Bridget Moore, this poet-in-exile gives us two more apt self-images: W. H. Auden living in New York and John Butler Yeats, W. B. Yeats's father, who spent his last years there. Addressing the ghost of Auden in Greenwich Village, he writes:

> you prescribe a cure
> for our civilization and its discontents
> based on *agapé*, Baroque opera, common
> sense
> and the creative impulse that brought us here,
> sustaining us now as we face a more boring
> future.

Mahon himself prescribes no cures.

Though he searches and ponders, though like Auden and Freud he is a keen student of "our civilization and its discontents," part of his authenticity derives from his honest bafflement—a reminder that poetry of the highest order is as much about what we do not know as what we know. In working toward a definition of this most adept and yet finally unfinished poet, we might want to include our voices in the question Mahon asks of John Butler Yeats:

> may we add
> that you were at home here and in human
> nature?

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—But also, in your words, lived and died
like all of us, then as now, "an exile and a
stranger"?

If *The Hudson Letter* reports on life in exile, *The Yellow Book* represents an exile's return. (I use the terms "exile" and "return" in a relative sense: given the ease of air travel between New York and Dublin, Mahon presumably would have gone back and forth freely.) With the fastest-growing economy in Europe, the Irish society that the returning Mahon finds—this applies to Dublin in particular—is changing in ways he finds repellent.[2] In New York he could remain detached, condescendingly tolerant:

an amateur immigrant, sure I like the corny
humanism and car-stickers—"I (heart symbol)
NY"—
and yet remain sardonic and un-*chic*,
an undesirable "resident alien" on this shore,
a face in the crowd in this "off-shore
boutique"

In Dublin the changes hit too close for comfort. He sees his own neighborhood becoming "a Georgian theme-park for the tourist." In his scorn of "the pastiche paradise of the post-modern," Mahon inscribes devastating and curmudgeonly heroic couplets and quatrains.

But he is more than a satirist of "an age of sado-monetarism." As the Millennium turns, Mahon is pushing sixty and thus arriving at an age where elegy becomes one's habitual mode of experiencing the world. He vividly evokes several "scenes" that readers who were there will enjoy—London in the "swinging 60s," for instance:

. . . a time of drag and Pop Art, hair and
clothes,
Beardsley prints, floral design and rainbow
hues,
of Quant and Biba, Shrimpton and Twiggy,
lurid tights,
gratuitous gesture, instant celebrity, insolent
pose.

"Oft in the stilly night," he concludes, "I remember our wasted youth."

"At the Shelbourne" is a verse account of the Dublin hotel, for decades a literary and social landmark. In this poem Mahon speaks in the voice of the Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen, who returned from London during World War II to evaluate Irish attitudes toward the war for the British government. As a returned traveller, Mahon occupies a somewhat analogous position, "spying on my own past"—but he reports only to himself, and, by extension, to the reader who looks over his shoulder.

The setting for most of these bleak meditations is his austere room at the top of a building in Dublin: "My attic window under the shining slates/ where the maids slept in the days of Wilde and Yeats." In his lofty retreat he resembles his own characterization of Schopenahuer: "he stares from the window at his idea of the world,/ its things-in-themselves . . . ./ the earth and he were never on intimate terms."

The Yellow Book, its title alluding to the fashionable magazine of the 1890s for which Wilde and others of "the decadents" wrote and in which Aubrey Beardsley published many of his drawings, implicitly draws a parallel between the *fin de siècle* periods of the last century and of our own. Oscar Wilde, Elizabeth Bowen, Schopenhauer, Baudelaire, well-known and obscure Irish literary figures from the 1950s—these become the poet's platonic companions in the worlds of thought and memory where he lives at one remove from the actual city of Dublin, which for a man of his tastes becomes less and less habitable. His opinion of mankind is buttressed by evocations of other kindred spirits like the Roman poet Juvenal, whose tenth satire Mahon renders as "The Idiocy of Human Aspiration." Readers who share this poet's view that we are living in a world where idiocy is on the rise and folly reigns will find Derek Mahon to be excellent company.

2 See my "Letter from Dublin" in *The New Criterion* (December 1998).

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Poems
by David R. Slavitt & Neil Azevedo

Moses

If Moses could not enter, which of us can presume?

His offense was striking the rock? But where does it say
that to strike a rock is forbidden? And what harm did he do
to the rock, that, anyway, gave the precious water?
His defect, I fear, was more grave—an excess of goodness
that common sense would suggest is where we should look
in such a man, against whom, it is said, "the angels
banded together."
Because he had brought from heaven
the mighty mainstay, the Torah. His act did not
diminish heaven so much as elevate earth—
but still, from then on, the separation was less.

No ravening birds swarmed to tear at his liver
on a mountainside in the frozen north. Such stories,
too vivid, too violent, are not for us. But Jokhebed
cried aloud and looked in the valley of Moab
for the burial place, but it was nowhere to be seen.

She could not weep at his tomb, could not recite
the proper prayers, and her heart was sore, and in heaven
he knew, and cried aloud, "Jokhebed, my mother!"
loud and bitter, as if he were not in heaven,
as if, there too, he had not been permitted entrance.

—David R. Slavitt

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Those who stay

Umberto Boccioni

Inside the strictures of dark green
movement is inclined

to turn and rise away from what precedes,
a world constructed by those who pray

to be something like the bystander,
those in the background thinly assembled,

ció che non *siamo, ció che* non *vogliamo,*
we believe we focus

ourselves into less a disarray,
more to how we think we are

when we are not wrong,
when we are what we think we say—

constructed in the color that is not
seen but believed—until we are relieved.

—Neil Azevedo

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Marco Polo

a game of hide-and-seek

Stunned by the blindfold he is lost
in this front yard suddenly fragrant,

fraught with dark, the bark-hiding moth
deep in alfalfa roiled with gnats,

the hesitations that coil in bats,
his body hedges and prepares for harm

behind the focus of his less familiar eyes,
behind the faithless, fearful and soft cloth,

feckless, haptic, dazzled and still;
he works his way through grass filled

blindly by others' passing and their pause
and the giggles as he falls

to stupor, to gesture, to the awful rules.
He flees a sweat-bee flanking his ear,

and sightlessly searches for all of his choices
until it's clear; he fumbles the way of their voices.

—Neil Azevedo

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Theater

Desensitized beyond belief

by Mark Steyn

"I see that English nurses are protesting against the movie *The Snake Pit*, because it represents nurses as hard and unsympathetic. The curse of today is the Pressure Group, especially in America. You can't take a step without getting picketed by someone. One odd aspect of it is that you can no longer put a negro on the stage unless you make him very dignified. Owing to the activities of the negro pressure group, comic negro characters are absolutely taboo. The result is that all the negro actors are out of work, because the playwrights won't write parts for them."

Thus, P. G. Wodehouse writing to Bill Townend, on March 30, 1949 and foreshadowing by almost half-a-century the recent revival of *Show Boat* (a work in which he had a hand, or anyway a finger), a production picketed during its Toronto tryout by black community groups who denounced it as racist. They were right: the black characters were the only ones treated with dignity and respect; the whites were reduced to musical comedy cut-outs.

That's one reason why I'm relatively relaxed about any forthcoming Federal hate crimes legislation. To anyone who's dropped by the theater on a semi-regular basis in the last twenty years, Washington is merely a belated convert to the formal codification that already prevails in much of our cultural life. The dignity categories have expanded a tad since 1949—not just blacks, but also women, gays, immigrants, the disabled, the transgendered . . . On the other side of the scale sit the increasingly put-upon category of straight white males, gamely bearing the burden of the full range of humanity's darker emotions all by themselves. Whatever one might feel about the justice of this dispensation, it must surely be a little tedious, from the dramatist's point of view, to have all the roles pre-assigned.

But apparently not. For here is Neil LaBute with the summer's hottest ticket, *Bash: Latter-Day Plays*—actually, monologues—at the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre. LaBute is an admired independent filmmaker on the cutting edge of the zeitgeist, etc., and also a practising Mormon—a combination which if not mutually exclusive would seem at least a little impractical in today's world. But his 1997 film debut impressed all Robert Redford's chums at Sundance, and since then he's never looked back. *In the Company of Men* was about men in a company: two junior execs flying off for a lousy six-week stint in some nowheresville branch office. Bummer. So, while they're still at the airport, beefing about work and the way they've been screwed over by their sad-ass women at home, they concoct a scheme to get them through their month and a half in cowtown: they'll select at random some "corn-fed bitch" whom they will flatter, seduce, and dump. The one they eventually choose has the added bonus of being stone deaf. LaBute has a great ear for dialogue—not the ersatz naturalism and attitudinal

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posturing of Hollywood, but the casual cruelties you overhear at bars and bus stations. And he's able to ratchet up this dialogue unobtrusively to the point where the chilling, decisive line of *In the Company of Men*—"Let's do it! Let's hurt someone!"—seems utterly plausible and in character.

One assumes LaBute wouldn't be a convert to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints if he didn't believe in it: choosing to be a Mormon is not like, say, swinging by the episcopalian church once every few weeks. So one assumes his interest in his two protagonists stems from the moral vacuum in which they operate, the vacuum in which evil arises. Happily, for his bank account at least, the film took off with the Sundance set for cruder reasons: it confirms their view of the general crappiness of white businessmen. It is, apparently, the ruthless world of the white-collar corporate life that inevitably turns men into savage beasts. No matter that the need to concoct an elaborate conspiracy undermines the film's premise: If the male psyche is such an icy wasteland, surely this sort of thing comes instinctively to them? No matter that there's a strong case to be made that a tedious office job is one of the few things that tame a man's natural bestiality and smooth him out into a house-trained suburban bore: On the whole, pre-Rolodex societies tend to be far more feral. No matter that in the supposedly more enlightened precincts of Hollywood the menfolk are crummier than any place in the civilized world and, in pursuit of the temporary gratification thereof, the town's women submit to the most pathetic sexual degradation and humiliate themselves in silicone reconstruction that reduces them to concrete caricatures of real women. Forget all that. According to admirers of *In the Company of Men*, the real shocker is what white-collar junior managers get up to when they're shooting the breeze around the executive percolator. As a result, LaBute now finds himself the only Mormon art-house darling on the planet.

He is, in that sense, all too typical of the "challenging" artist in our time: Instead of "challenging" our received opinions, the artist panders to them in extreme ways. No one who goes to the theater has to worry that he'll be presented with a "challenging" case that the promiscuous gay leads an empty and self-destructive existence which has wrought devastation on his "community," or that the welfare policies of the past thirty years have managed to destroy the black family and ensure that the average African American baby born in our cities comes into the world with the dice loaded against him. Millions of Americans believe these things but the smaller sub-group of American theatergoers do not, and have no desire to be "challenged" on the subject. One of LaBute's strongest cards, simply in terms of construction, is his understanding of feeling: the protagonists of *In the Company of Men* aren't just out to hurt someone but to *feel* what it's like to do so, and LaBute communicates that so well that we feel what they feel like, too. What we mostly feel, however, is how much better we are than they are. And, in a community ritual such as theater, the ability to imbue an audience with a sense of its own superiority is not to be disdained. In the cramped confines of the Fairbanks Theatre, LaBute does that superbly: the air is thick with self-congratulation.

This time, he's offering classical allusions, which is all you need: the first play is "Medea Redux," and you couldn't put it any better than that. In this monologue, Calista Flockhart speaks into a police station tape recorder and recounts how, at the age of thirteen, she was impregnated and abandoned by her English teacher. Miss Flockhart is famed as TV's Ally McBeal. I've never seen the show and, statistically, there's a strong chance you won't have, either. But I've seen a zillion articles discussing her as an icon of the new feminism, or post-feminism, or whatever: *Time* put Ally McBeal on the cover with Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, even though Ally does not actually exist, whereas apparently Ms. Steinem does. The livelier tabloids are more

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preoccupied with Miss Flockhart's emaciated form and hardly a week goes by without some headline promising us "The Skinny On Ally McBeal." Mr LaBute and his director, Joe Mantello, say they wanted Miss Flockhart because she would draw a mainstream TV audience that would be discomforted by the play's message. I can't see it myself: *Bash* serves up various hicksville Mormons—a Salt Lake City businessman, a clunky young couple of goofy lovers on vacation in New York; "Ally McBeal" is a glib, superficially hip TV series with cool characters whose office has a unisex bathroom. The idea that fans of the latter would identify with the former is utterly preposterous, though it does perhaps shed an interesting light on off-Broadway's understanding of the vast, grunting American hinterland. It's been claimed that some "Ally" fans have been so affronted by Miss Flockhart's raw, unsettling performance that they've walked out. But none were in evidence on the night I went. And, in truth, the birdlike adolescent with the trailer-park twang leaning into the interrogation light on the small stage instantly dispels any associations with her TV character. This is a terrific performance.

Miss Flockhart is using off-Broadway strictly as a summer vacation, and by the time this issue appears "Ally McBeal" will have re-commenced its celluloid semester on the west coast. So it's acceptable, I think, to discuss more of the plot than one would normally disclose. In "Medea Redux," the young girl is abandoned by her teacher-lover the moment she gives birth. Years later, when the child reaches the age of her mother's seduction, mom kills the kid. The symmetry is an especially literal illustration of what is actuarially true: that damaged children become damaged adults. It reiterates the theme of LaBute's second film, *Your Friends and Neighbors*, in which a sextet couple and uncouple in various permutations. Marketed as a sort of Manhattan sex comedy for the Nineties, it was, at core, about the carelessness of the sexually liberated—the way men and women casually destroy each other and refuse to accept responsibility. I gotta be me and, if that damages you, it's not my fault. LaBute believes in the concept of sin—not just as a concept, not just as some sicko religious guilt-trip our less enlightened predecessors insisted on dumping on us, but in sin itself. "Medea Redux" is a very moral monologue: an extreme illustration of a dramatic truth.

Next comes "Iphigenia in Orem," in which Ron Eldard, as a Mormon traveling man, sits in his hotel room and tells us about what prove to be the interrelated catastrophes of his corporate downsizing and the death of his infant daughter. In straitened economic circumstances, having another mouth to feed would be unfair on the rest of his family. So he dispatches her. This too is a savagely moral work, in tune with the age. A few years ago, the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a very much pro-abortion body, released a survey of the reasons why one in three pregnancies is terminated:

> Woman is concerned about how having a baby could change her life: 76 percent
> Woman can't afford baby now: 68 percent

And way down at the bottom:

> Woman has health problems: 7 percent
> Woman was victim of rape or incest: 1 percent

So we abort babies for reasons of personal or economic convenience, a right that extends up to the moment of delivery and even, in some cases of partial-birth abortion (or, as *The New York Times* puts it, "a procedure some opponents call 'partial-birth abortion'"), a few crucial seconds beyond. Why should this "right to choose" cease after birth? Why should you be entitled to be rid of your inconvenient child two days before delivery but not two days after? The extremism of which LaBute is often accused is, in fact, the merest logical extension of prevailing cultural trends.

The question is whether what the playwright calls his "unforgiving and Old Testa-

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ment" morality registers with even a tenth of his off-Broadway audience. LaBute writes about what he knows—Mormons. But most New York theatergoers don't know any Mormons, so, presented with an evening of damaged Mormons in contemporary society, they attribute the damage not to the contemporary society but to the fact that they're Mormons. This is triumphantly confirmed by the final play of the trilogy, in which a pretty young Utah couple spend a weekend in New York culminating with the fresh-faced young man bashing an elderly gay to death in Central Park. In what Frank Rich calls "the summer of Matthew Shepard," the vulnerable gay set upon in the dark is the very acme of martyrdom. When you send a Mormon in to do the deed, quoting scripture and laughing off the incident, what do you expect audiences to take home with them? Especially when the Mormon doesn't even have the decency to stay in Utah and waste people but instead comes to Central Park? Thus, the final "bash" of the evening is not just an isolated act but a very dagger at the heart of modern civilization. Paul Rudd, who plays the young killer, ends the evening lit from below like a Satanic pretty boy.

"The Face Of Evil, All Peaches And Cream" ran *The New York Times* headline. "Evil wears an all-American glow," began Ben Brantley underneath. Beware "that sheen of idealized, corn-country wholesomeness," especially from Mormons: "The clean-cut look associated with that religion is used in gleaming contrast to the darkness within." LaBute may believe he's giving us good old-fashioned Mormon values, but his New York audience adores him because he so brilliantly justifies their contempt for flyover country.

In his adoring notice, Ben Brantley mentioned, en passant, *Shadow of a Doubt*, Alfred Hitchcock's film about the elegant, murderous uncle who moves in with a small-town family. The picture hinges on the relationship between the two Charlies—Uncle Charlie (Joseph Cotten) and his virginal niece (Teresa Wright)—two sides of the same coin. You don't have to be a Jungian to subscribe to the notion of the "shadow" that we all have; Robert Louis Stevenson put it more playfully:

> I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,
> And what can be the use of him is more than I can see.
> He is very, very like me from the heels up to the head;
> And I see him jump before me, when I jump into my bed.

"Do you know the world is a foul sty?," Uncle Charlie asks his niece. "Do you know if you ripped the fronts off houses you'd find swine?" But the point is that, in those days, the house still had fronts. The idea of the shadow—the dark side, wriggling free of our moral constraints—doesn't work in an age when moral constraints themselves are frowned upon and married men go on daytime talk-shows to "confess" to their wives their fondness for transsexual hookers—not because they're planning to cut it out henceforth, but just to demand their spouses "come to terms" with it. The shadow has jumped so far ahead that the most striking change since *Shadow of a Doubt* is the basic switch of roles: in Hitchcock's small-town America, the psychopath is charmingly amoral; when today's dramatists wander down Main Street, the psychopaths are, au contraire, charmlessly moral—they kill out of a clear moral logic. As the fresh-faced young gay-basher says in *Bash*, "I know Scripture." If you go to a play or a movie or watch a TV show these days, the fellow who turns out to be the killer or the spousal abuser or the child molester will be the one who "knows Scripture." Nothing puts your moral compass out of whack more than . . . traditional morality.

As part of my own summer, I was called upon to organize some of my small New Hampshire town's "Old Home Day" festivities, in the course of which I was obliged to dust off for the evening entertainment

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some old poems and songs written by schoolteachers and selectmen and farmers for town reunions of the nineteenth century. A lot of the writing was much better than I expected, but, as part of the necessary compression, I found myself keeping the evocative stuff about maple sugaring and rusty plows and almost instinctively slashing what strikes our generation as a gloomy preoccupation with the hereafter:

> But let us in all patience wait
> God's summon in the pearly gate
> Beyond which may we meet again
> And with our elder Brother reign.

In 1885, these lines were the hit of the show. One-hundred-and-fourteen years later, any man offering such thoughts at a public, secular entertainment would be regarded as a nutcake at best. It's tempting in rural America, where the landscape looks much the same, and even the new houses are built with the same clapboards and shakes our great-grandfathers would recognize, and the tumbledown stone walls and cellar holes and old orchards keep the past visibly part of the present . . . it's tempting to assume we are not so very different from our forebears. But the most casual glance at the way our great-grandparents talked about life leads one to the inescapable conclusion that, in less than a century, we have become fundamentally separated from our past.

There is room for an honest difference of opinion on this matter: if you're gay or a Southern Black, the past is understandably less attractive. But it seems almost bewilderingly obtuse to attribute America's woes to an excess of religious sensibility, an accusation that's made routinely in the coastal broadsheets and seems unlikely to be covered by even the most exhaustive "hate crimes" legislation. Frank Rich, for example, angrily attacks those irresponsible types peddling the Internet rumors that the Columbine killers were gay. But he's happy to link the Shepard killing with the "gruesome homophobic violence" in *Bash* and the Mormon murderer "citing Scripture to justify his hatred." Matthew Shepard's killers aren't religious in any recognizable sense of that word: they are, to use the technical term, assholes.

The evidence in all these front-page firestorms is of groups of people desensitized beyond belief, so to speak. That's what LaBute writes about—pushing deep inside the unimaginable depths of parents who kill their children, and the other stock figures from the news-show horror stories. But that's not why he's a hit in New York: instead, they lap him up because it's yet another savage indictment of homophobic religious bigotry. One of contemporary pop culture's few moral writers has fallen among sinners and libertines. What a fate.

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Art

Sculpture in the Tuileries

by Karen Wilkin

Last winter, a surprising group of sculptures appeared in the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris, most of them in the grass plots on either side of the "triumphal way" that runs down the center of the vast pleasure garden, with a few set near the paired pavilions of the Orangerie and the Jeu de Paume. The sculptures were all by what are now known as "historical modernists": Auguste Rodin, Henri Laurens, Henry Moore, Germaine Richier, Alberto Giacometti, Max Ernst, David Smith, Etienne Martin, and Jean Dubuffet. These new arrivals were not the first twentieth-century sculptures to enter the immense, symmetrical precinct of broad sanded paths, clipped chestnut trees, formal basins of water, and over-scaled stone figures. The Tuileries has been host to a gathering of voluptuous nudes by Aristide Maillol since André Malraux's reign as minister of culture, almost half a century ago, plus other pieces of more recent vintage. In the past few years, sculpture shows at the Jeu de Paume—an exhibition center since the Musée d'Orsay absorbed its Impressionist holdings—have sometimes overflowed into the garden: most dramatically during the 1996 extravaganza "A Century of British Sculpture," when, among other delights, an enormous four-part Anthony Caro construction made a stately progress down the triumphal way and a sprightly Barry Flanagan hare frolicked near the entrance. But the sculptures recently placed in the Tuileries are the first unequivocally modernist works to be *permanently* installed there.

As a group, they form a highly visible—and vital—connection between the museums that bracket the Tuileries: the Louvre, bastion of traditional art from antiquity to the romantics, at one end, and, at the other, the Orangerie, home of some of Claude Monet's most ambitious, lyrical, and radical lily pond paintings, and the Jeu de Paume, now a site for shows of recent art. Like the I. M. Pei pyramid that serves as the Louvre's official entrance, the new group of modern sculptures at the Tuileries makes the connection between past and present seamless. It's no accident that the majority of the works flank the great axis that links the pyramid, Napoleon's arch, the Egyptian obelisk in the Place de la Concorde, and —eventually—the Arc de Triomphe and the squared-off Arche de la Défense. The whole ensemble is a quintessentially French fusion of theory and practice, the practice serving to make visible the theory.

Just how these modern sculptures came to be installed in the Tuileries is less a tale of bringing theory to life or even of aesthetic choices than it is a political drama. It would be astonishing if it weren't, particularly in France, where "cultural initiatives" of all sorts are almost entirely dependent on government funding and because of this routinely generate bitter polemics. What *is* surprising is that instead of being exclusively a saga of bureaucratic posturing and horse-

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trading, the story of how modern sculpture was brought to the Tuileries has as its protagonist an artist—the sculptor Alain Kirili, who is known internationally for his massive forged iron and aluminum monoliths and his multi-part metal constructions. A Parisian who has lived in New York for many years, Kirili is ubiquitous. Many of us, who run into him constantly, both in Paris and New York, suspect that there are really two of him.

According to Kirili, the project of bringing modern sculpture to the Tuileries came about almost by chance. In 1986, the French government commissioned a sculpture from him, a low-lying group of geometric elements constructed of painted steel. In 1996, the piece was reinstalled in the Tuileries, near the Orangerie, and during the dedication Kirili said he hoped that his sculpture would translate the modernism of the Monet lily pond paintings within the building into three dimensions and bring it into the public realm. He spoke, too, of how exciting it was to establish a visible continuity between twentieth-century sculpture and the sculpture of the past—as represented in the Louvre's collection. The then-Minister of Culture, Philippe Douste-Blazy, found the idea so engaging that he asked Kirili on the spot to take on the challenge of bringing modern sculpture into the Tuileries. That the sculptor accepted is perfectly understandable; that he succeeded is remarkable. And there's more to come. Some additional historical pieces by "historical modernists," i.e. dead twentieth-century sculptors, may still be added and sculptures commissioned from a group of contemporary artists—including Martin Puryear, Rebecca Horn, Giuseppe Penone, and Anne Rochette—will gradually make their appearance.

Kirili is a small, round dynamo, passionate about Abstract Expressionism, Gothic sculpture and architecture, and free jazz, all of which embody, for him, the fusion of the physical and the spiritual that he believes to be the ideal condition of art. He frequently organizes informal events in which celebrated jazz musicians perform in response to installations of his sculpture, as well as producing more formal concerts by jazz luminaries in Gothic churches, with his own work brought in for the occasion. In addition to apparently unlimited energy, Kirili brings to these undertakings considerable charm and a typically French ability to present complicated issues in an orderly, theory-supported fashion. His ubiquity helps; he knows everyone. The fact that he managed to keep his project alive through several changes of minister of culture suggests that Kirili possesses superior abilities as a negotiator. And he is also an adroit politician. The choice of "historical modernists" rather than contemporary sculptors for phase one of his project, for example, was intended first to make the transition between past and present smoother, second to reassure the conservatives so that phase one would go ahead, and third to frustrate the radicals so that they would throw their full support behind whatever was proposed for phase two.

Kirili describes what he has been doing as creating "a symphony in three dimensions for twentieth- and twenty-first-century sculpture"—he is good at catchy phrases that culture officials can remember. The statement implies a kind of harmony and unison that hardly reflects the complicated maneuvering that accompanied the evolution of the project. Being asked to bring modern sculpture into the Tuileries by the minister of culture is not the same as a go-ahead. Kirili needed allies, backing for his choices, permission to move the sculptures he selected from their present homes—which included several important museums—and agreement to placing them in the sites he wanted. He had little difficulty obtaining letters of support from curators, collectors, and critics, and no trouble coming up with an intelligently orchestrated wish-list of significant, appropriate, and seemingly available modern sculptures. But securing commitments that the listed works could be moved to the Tuileries from an as-

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sortment of French state museums, international artists' estates, and the like was another matter. Despite Kirili's skillful handling of cultural bureaucrats, politicians, journalists, and other interested parties, his proposal triggered a struggle between conservative and progressive factions, which was eventually resolved only by the ministry of culture's apparent agreement with all sides and promises of full support for everyone's position.

Questions of siting and context remained. The present-day Tuileries retains aspects of plans from several different periods, which all had to be considered. Parts of the garden are also under the unofficial (and sometimes official) "protection" of various individuals. The side where the children's pony rides and the carousel are located, for example, is said to be of special interest to Mme. Giscard d'Estaing, while the opposite side has received the benefit of a plan drawn up by the nineteenth-century historian, Anne Pingeot (mistress of the late President Mitterand and mother of his child), that proposes excluding everything but nineteenth-century sculpture in that zone. And certain museum directors, citing impeccable ideological and technical reasons, refused to allow works to be moved from their institutions to *any* site in the garden; one of the strongest opponents of the Tuileries project was the director of the Picasso Museum, the conservative Jean Clair, whose lack of sympathy prevented the inclusion of Picasso's *Man with a Sheep*, a sculpture Kirili ardently desired not only as a key modernist sculpture appropriate to a "jardin de plaisance," but also as one whose subject, a modernized version of a classical motif adapted to Early Christian symbolism, made readily visible the connection between past and present that underscored the whole undertaking.

Was it worth the battle? Obviously, modern sculpture belongs in the public realm as much as traditional works sanctified by the past, so from an intellectual point of view, it is impossible to fault Kirili's achievement. In terms of aesthetics, it is a great pleasure to come upon many of the works he has placed in this unexpected setting. And the installation raises interesting questions about size and scale, about the role of sculpture in public places, and about the nature of public and private art. Such questions, admittedly, almost always arise whenever sculpture is made to confront the world, but the Tuileries project provokes special considerations since, as Kirili has pointed out, it is neither a museum sculpture garden nor a sculpture park, but rather a place where people go to relax. How are you to think about modern sculpture in such a setting? Most of the traditional stone statues around the fountains and elsewhere along the triumphal way are essentially pleasant and decorative, rather than aesthetically challenging. Are the pieces in Kirili's installation simply required to fulfill this role or should you demand more of them?

Some of the works newly placed in the Tuileries would be remarkable in any setting; most of them are also considerably better than the existing statuary and none of them is any worse. But the issue turns out to be more complicated than simply how good the sculpture is. First-rate works don't always declare themselves effectively outdoors, especially not in a space on the huge scale of the Tuileries, with its wide paths, endless vistas, long rows of disciplined chestnut trees (many newly replanted after an ambitious rejuvenation program), symmetrical plots of grass, and curious lack of detail at a human scale. Of course, it can be argued that the very immensity of the park and its relative featurelessness are exactly why you need sculpture to engage the eye, to mediate between those daunting *allées* and the people who walk in them. But then the issue of siting becomes even more crucial.

If you begin on the raised terrace near the Orangerie, the first sculpture you come upon—appropriately enough, given the history of the project—is Kirili's 1986 *Grand commandement blanc*, a scatter of white-

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painted geometric forms, each raised on a short plinth, suggestive now of some sort of alphabet, now of an arcane equation of likes and unlikes, now of a gathering of alert, frontal figures. The economy, the animation, and the presentation of elements "on sticks" all acknowledge Kirili's admiration for David Smith. (Kirili's choice of a white-painted Smith from the 1960s, installed near the triumphal way, leaves no doubt about his enthusiasm.) Quite apart from the theoretical connection between the floating lilies of Monet's *Nymphéas* and the hovering elements of Kirili's sculpture against the green lawn, the placement of *Grand commandement blanc* is sympathetic. The wall of the Orangerie defines one side of the otherwise rather open, unbroken space, while rows of trees loosely screen the immense Place de la Concorde in the distance without interrupting the casual dialogue between the small, crisp components of Kirili's sculpture in the foreground, and the obelisk and the other rhetorical flourishes of the Place de la Concorde in the background. (This dialogue is compromised by oversized constructions celebrating something-or-other that appear occasionally in the *place* and by portable buildings placed near the Orangerie for special shows.) More scrupulous maintenance would help, especially since the sprinkling of metro tickets, tissues, and candy wrappers sets up a certain rapport with the white shapes of the sculpture.

A trio of Rodins comes next: *Eve*, 1881–c. 1899, *La Grande Ombre*, 1880–c. 1904, and *La Méditation, avec bras*, 1881–1905 (all Musée Rodin). At first they seem a little lost on the featureless terrace near the Orangerie, but the siting turns out to be brilliant—close enough to the building to emphasize the superhuman scale of the three heroic figures, yet sufficiently isolated by the surrounding expanse of sand that they seem detached from their surroundings—although they issue a challenge to the stone figures near the central *bassin* on the lower level. That isolation, even that sense of lost-ness, seems congruent with the emotional pitch of the sculptures, each clenched in an attitude of anguished introspection. The tense, angular poses and the wrenchings of limbs and torsos remind you of Rodin's debt to Michelangelo, especially his *Bound Slaves*, which are in the Louvre, at the other end of the garden. The placement of the Rodins emphasizes their self-sufficiency. The three figures not only fold in on themselves, but also face one another to create a psychologically charged zone defined by their rather widely separated bases of pale stone. The three figures demand that you enter that zone, that you pay attention; you can't just stroll past.

Moore's bony bronze *Reclining Figure* (1951, Musée national d'art moderne) is well served by its placement on the landing of one of the stairs joining the two levels of the Tuileries. The site, probably the most accommodating in the whole garden, allows the sculpture to be seen from several levels and viewpoints, nicely framed by the stairs and backed by a handsome stone wall, which probably makes *Reclining Figure* look better than it is. The equivalent prime location on the Jeu de Paume side is occupied by an uninspired Raymond Mason bronze from the early 1960s, an installation that predates Kirili's project. Also on the Jeu de Paume side is a big Dubuffet, one of those cookie-cutter personages with agitated contours, bold red, white, and blue patterns, and emphatic black drawing. It looks exactly like what it is—an image conceived in two-dimensions, arbitrarily enlarged, and fabricated as a free-standing object. It's devoid of sculptural expression, although undeniably cheerful and decorative, as it waves happily from a kind of secret enclosure surrounded by hedges. Since the Dubuffet yields everything it has to offer from a distance and since, at thirteen feet high, it is one of the largest works in Kirili's "symphony," it would have done just fine in a location that afforded long views. You wonder why it is occupying one of the most intimate and sheltered of all the available sites.

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The question of siting becomes more acute as you move down the center of the Tuileries and encounter the sculptures on the grass plots along the broad main path. For the most part, the sculptures along the triumphal way are slightly more than life-sized—about seven or eight feet high—and because of this rather modest scale, you discover them only as you walk along, which makes sense in a park designed for strolling. The dense walls of clipped chestnut trees edging the paths, forming vertical green planes against the horizontal green planes of lawn, help to concentrate your attention. (Where the chestnuts have been recently replanted, these solid walls of foliage do not yet exist, making it more difficult to separate sculptures from the complicated, layered background, at least for the time being; in winter, of course, the rows of leafless trees are more transparent.) Although very diverse, the sculptures share, explicitly or implicitly, a sense of the body, so that they become surrogate visitors to the garden, unruly creatures who violate the sacrosanct squares of lawn, each with its "*pelouse interdite*" sign and its inhospitable berm at the edges.

The most evident problem is that none of the sculptures on the grass plots can be approached closely, so they must read well at a distance if they are to make themselves felt, but even if they succeed in holding the space, nuances of surface and details get lost. Pieces with bulky, generalized forms generally fare best, whatever their merit—witness Henri Laurens's pneumatic Cubist nude and Etienne Martin's group of thick-set abstract figures; the Laurens is less than compelling, but it holds its own just as well as the more complex and innovative Martin. More delicate sculptures usually suffer from being kept at a rather arbitrary distance from the viewer. The exception is, interestingly, Giacometti's *Grande Femme III* (1960, Alberto and Annette Giacometti Estate). The rich surface inflections of the slender bronze figure are largely lost from the vantage point of the path, but in compensation, the ample space of the setting emphasizes the asymmetry of the torso, the eloquent drawing of the profiles, and the apparent fragility of the piece. In winter, the *Grande Femme III* enters into a slightly obvious conversation with the bare trees surrounding the lawn, but when the trees are in leaf, the effect is magical. The large expanse of empty lawn with its enclosing green walls makes the sculpture seem about to disappear, to pull into itself, as though the malleable bronze were crushed by the pressure of space itself.

By contrast, Germaine Richier's agile bronzes, inspired by chess pieces, are diminished by their setting. They are finely wrought, intimate sculptures that depend on touch, on small transitions from thick to thin that function as vivid evocations of form and equally vivid records of the artist's rapidly moving hand. Viewed from the edge of the lawn, these subtleties disappear. The space allotted to the Richiers seems too big and they appear to be generalized and somewhat predictable, which I suspect would not be true if they were indoors or if they could be seen from a closer vantage point in a more defined space—say, in the outdoor "room" where the Dubuffet has been placed.

Of all the sculptures on the grass plots, David Smith's *Primo Piano II* (1962, Collection Candida and Rebecca Smith) comes off best. It's a terrific piece with a powerful presence—an elevated horizontal bar, like a still life table flattened into two dimensions, supports a row of vertically "presented" elements: a flat zig-zag of rectangular planes, an inverted teardrop, a tilted "lectern," skewed ninety degrees, and a circle on an angled stick. It helps that *Primo Piano II*'s side and end views differ dramatically and that Smith meant the piece to be seen outdoors; the white painted surface, punctuated by the single dark shape of the "teardrop" seems to have been designed to reflect light, while the changes in density and shape visible as you move around the piece come as revelations. It helps, too, that these purely "sculptural" three-dimensional

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subtleties are sufficiently graphic to be eloquent from just about any viewpoint or distance and that, at about thirteen feet wide, *Primo Piano II* is large enough that you don't need to measure it against your own body from a close vantage point to understand its scale and proportions—as you do the Richiers, for example.

Primo Piano II is the only Smith in a public place in Europe. It's a high point of the Tuileries installation and makes you aware of how few pieces of that level there are, ultimately, in the garden. It makes you think, too, about what is missing. Even if *Man with a Sheep* has been declared off limits, where is Picasso? Or Brancusi? Where is Calder, who was on Kirili's original wish-list? I'm told that negotiations are going on for long-term loans from museums in and outside of France, so we'll just have to be patient.

The project remains controversial. The responses of the Parisian painters, sculptors, and curators I polled informally ranged from indifferent ("haven't gotten there yet; I never go to that part of Paris") to enthusiastic ("great to see a Smith") to typically French ("they should never had entrusted it to a single person; there should have been a committee"). Most people I talked to were more exercised about the choice of artists for commissioned works than about the first wave of works installed (Yes, self-interest came into it). I myself am of two minds. It's refreshing to see a current public art project that excludes many of the usual suspects, that doesn't automatically include, say, Richard Serra, Beverly Pepper, Magdalena Abakanowicz, or Louise Bourgeois. Yet I am puzzled by some of the omissions—Eduardo Chillida, for example, or, what is more surprising, Anthony Caro, especially given the undiminished toughness and inventiveness of this British master's recent work. But British sculptors, in general, are conspicuously absent from phase two. If Kirili had asked, I'd have told him about the stainless steel towers that the Irish sculptor John Gibbons has been building; they'd be spectacular against the chestnut trees.

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Summer in the city's museums

by Mario Naves

"Why on earth," a colleague asked, "would you want to write about Gustave Moreau?" The answer, I think, is plain to anyone interested in the byways of twentieth-century art; Moreau (1826–1898) is an obligatory footnote in art history texts because of his role as the teacher of Henri Matisse. (Georges Rouault and Albert Marquet were also pupils.) In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition "Gustave Moreau: Between Epic and Dream"—seen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art from June 1 to August 22—Douglas W. Druick, Senior Curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, writes that "Moreau's dream of a symbolic language found its true voice" in "the joyous color, graceful arabesques, and decorative sensibilities of Henri Matisse." The organizers of the show seek to establish Moreau as a pivotal Modernist antecedent—by linking him not only with Matisse, but also with the Symbolists, the Surrealists, and the New York School—and to move him into the ranks of the masters. They find themselves thwarted, however, by the work itself. When Druick begins his statement with a cautionary "perhaps most surprisingly," we begin to wonder about the value he places on Moreau's particular voice. For it is impossible to experience the art featured in "Between Epic and Dream" as anything other than kitsch: eccentric, ostentatious, and not unaccomplished kitsch, but kitsch nonetheless.

A better question is why has the Met dedicated space to such a trifling painter? Perhaps Moreau's fin-de-siècle ambiance was felt to be resonant with our own flustered era. Certainly, his marginal status mirrors our own culture's fixations. That his pictures were created concurrent with—and in opposition to—the radical art that came to be known as Impressionism makes him something of an underdog, and who doesn't like to root for the underdog? I only wish that the art was worth rooting for. Moreau's ponderous and theatrical paintings don't even have the benefit of camp appeal. Incapable of organizing a picture as a fluid totality, Moreau's compositions are choppy and his encyclopedic imagery overwrought. Only in a casual, pen-and-ink self-portrait (c. 1880–1890) does the life of art brighten this cloistered and gloomy show. "I have allowed my imagination free play," said Moreau, "and I have not been led astray by it." Yet "Between Epic and Dream" betrays an artist who probably would have profited from less time spent plumbing the shallows of his own sticky universe.

In the May 28, 1864 issue of *Le Monde illustré* there is a page of illustrations parodying paintings featured in the Salon of that year. One of the works lampooned was Moreau's *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, wherein the clinging figure of the sphinx has been replaced by a jumbo squirrel. Another drawing takes off on Edouard Manet's *Incident in a Bullfight*. This was but one of several vituperative spoofs of Manet's picture,

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mocking its spatial distortions and perceived stiffness. Attacks on the painting were not the province of cartoonists alone; Théophile Gautier found it "completely unintelligible," and H. de Callias, writing in *L'Artiste*, stated that "Manet . . . has a great deal of imagination, but this is how he abuses it." The painting that received such condemnation is no longer extant. Manet subsequently divided *Incident in a Bullfight* into two separate paintings, the iconic *Dead Torcador* and the lesser known *Bullfight*. Both were on view at the Frick Collection this past summer in an exhibition titled "Manet's The Dead Toreador and The Bullfight: Fragments of a Lost Salon Painting Reunited."

The show includes the title works, two magnificent Goya portraits reminding us of Manet's roots, and a vitrine of oddments including the issue of *Le Monde illustré* mentioned above. This is the first time that *The Dead Toreador*, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, and the Frick's *Bullfight* have been together, so to speak, since *Incident in a Bullfight* was returned to Manet's studio and reworked as two canvases. The alteration of the original picture seems to indicate that Manet agreed with the drubbing the painting received (critical complaints did not compel him, for instance, to change *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*). At this date, it takes a leap of the imagination to reconcile such distinct works. Manet's decidedly modern vision, with its compositional jump-cutting, has prepared us for the quirks of each painting as an individual entity (although *The Bullfight* is extreme even in this case). The somber tone and palette of *The Dead Toreador* and the brighter and blatantly impastoed *Bullfight* are radically different, notwithstanding the similarity of their subject. Through the use of x-ray photos, the catalogue proposes several reconstructions of the original canvas and these blueprints-after-the-fact are fun for anyone intrigued by the mysteries of artistic decision-making. We remain, however, with two singular paintings by one of the most gifted artists of the Modernist epoch.

"Surrealism: Two Private Eyes, The Nesuhi Ertegun and Daniel Filipacchi Collections"—on view at the Guggenheim Museum until September 12—begins at the base of Frank Lloyd Wright's rotunda with three sterling paintings by Giorgio de Chirico. At the top of the museum's ramp, the exhibition culminates with nearly forty signature images by René Magritte. Fans of Surrealist art will consider this denouement appropriately stirring. Those who think thirty-six paintings by Magritte is about thirty-five too many will find the above described orbit indicative of the exhibition's ratio of art to dross. "Two Private Eyes" contains about seven-hundred pieces—including paintings, sculptures, drawings, collages, books, objects, prints, and ephemera—drawn from the collections of two men whose sole criteria was the Surreal. The Guggenheim has indulged both Mr. Filipacchi and the Ertegun estate, in the presumable attempt at courting donations, by spurning quality control and overstuffing the museum. This is too bad. Pared down to one-fifth of its size, the show would have made an advantageous case for each collector's taste and Surrealist art in general.

"Two Private Eyes" features work by such central figures as Joan Miró, Jean Arp, Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, Man Ray, Yves Tanguy, Joseph Cornell, and Hans Bellmer, as well as a horde of (deservedly) lesser-known talents. Even if one's tolerance for distant horizons populated by enigmatic thingamajigs is great, the scale of the exhibition is taxing. There is, for example, a wonderful collage by Miró in one of the tower galleries, but one must wade through an abundance of dreck to uncover it. Still, the exhibition includes what amounts to a mini-retrospective of Cornell's boxes that would have made a fine show in and of itself, and an overview of Tanguy's oeuvre that makes a more convincing argument for his weird cosmos than one would have thought possible. Even more surprising is how good Dalí looks here. There are not a few of his pictures included that remind us of how schlocky an artist he, by and large,

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was. Yet, there is one wall at the Guggenheim that features six small panels, all dating between 1930–32, that capture the master of putrefact at the top of his form. And then there is *White Calm* (1936), a picture that doesn't escape the illustrative limitations of Dalí's art, but whose imagery is surprisingly underplayed and whose milky light makes quite an impression even from across the museum's rampway. The exhibition offers its share of such revelations, but, on the whole, drains the Surrealist ethos of its import and allure. Given the pedestrian nature of the liberated psyches on view, "Two Private Eyes" makes its strongest case for the benefits of repression.

In contrast to the Guggenheim's let's-throw-everything-in-the-rotunda-and-hope-it-will-stick approach, the Museum of Modern Art offered an unassuming exhibition of works-on-paper that extolled the rewards of the discriminating eye. "Collecting in Depth: Drawings by Grosz, Schwitters, Ernst, and Klee"—seen from May 13 until July 20—was drawn from the museum's collection and reminds us of what a treasure trove MOMA is when it isn't derailed by the vagaries of fashion. There were, as to be expected, old chestnuts on view—Klee's *Twittering Machine* (1922), for instance—but it was good to see the art of these worthy figures given shape without inflating their accomplishments. Schwitters's bits-and-pieces aesthetic—making magic, as it were, of the remnants of one's desk drawer—was evidenced in an all but definitive sampling of collages. Klee's affable genius for oddball figuration and the exquisitely smudged surface is, as ever, undeniable. Grosz's clinical line and the moral outrage it carries with it were displayed to bracing effect, and his depiction of urban anomie, *Republican Automatons* (1920), still haunts and rankles. The only artist "Collecting in Depth" can't redeem is Max Ernst. True, *The Hat Makes the Man* (1920) is a treasure of MOMA's permanent collection. But, Ernst's stylistic leapfrogging and flights of fancy can't obfuscate an art that lacks depth, commitment, and focus. Notwithstanding this Ernstian ebb in quality, "Collecting in Depth" was a gem.

"New York Collects: Drawings and Watercolors, 1900–1950," which was on view from May 20 to August 29 at the Morgan Library, was a stunning grab bag of works-on-paper. The words "grab bag" are used facetiously here, for the diverse variety of styles and genres was unified by an exceptional level of accomplishment. (The great stuff was so astonishing, in fact, that it took the merely good right up with it.) Taking into account the degree of connoisseurship we have come to expect from an institution as remarkable as the Morgan, this comes as little surprise. The Morgan's first exhibition dedicated exclusively to twentieth-century art, "New York Collects" was not only a valentine to urban sophistication, but also a confirmation that the first half of this century was an incredible—and incredibly dizzying—artistic epoch.

"New York Collects" displayed the major drifts of Modernism, but they took a back seat to the quality of the work itself. The flow of the exhibition was rejuvenating. Those of us who have had our fill of Picasso in recent years were reminded, particularly with *Two Women* (1920), of the splendor he was capable of. That there were works of a comparable stature by Cézanne, Matisse, Miró, Léger, Braque, Bonnard, Mondrian, and Brancusi may be stating the obvious, but in drawings of such magnitude obviousness slips by the wayside. There were quirky pieces as well. I never would have imagined that the name Max Beckmann and the word "rodeo" would occur in the same sentence, but there was Beckmann's sardonic and not unaffectionate portrayal of Americana in *Rodeo* (1949). Lesser artists like František Kupka, Roberto Matta, Richard Gerstl, Jean Dubuffet, Charles Sheeler, Raoul Haussman, Jackson Pollock, Wols, and George Bellows were seen to eye-opening effect. Indeed, Bellows's hellish *Mardi Gras* (c. 1908), with its Goyaesque blur of charcoal and ink, is the single finest

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work I have seen by this artist. One could go on at length mentioning other exquisite pieces—my favorites included de Kooning's *Woman, Wind, and Window II* (1950) and Dickinson's *Nude No. 3* (1936)—without doing justice to the show's majesty. Given the sharp and resolute curatorial eye of "New York Collects," one wagers the forthcoming exhibition on the last half of this century will be an event not to be missed.

Exhibition note

"George Stubbs in the Collection of Paul Mellon" at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, April 8–September 6, 1999

George Stubbs (1724–1806) is one of the most condescended to painters of all time. But this memorial exhibition of Stubbs's work from the collection of his most ardent collector shows that the condescension is not warranted. Stubbs was not a great painter. But he was an exceedingly interesting, and often quietly witty, one.

Stubbs is, of course, most famous for his pictures of horses. He was the son of a currier, and horses were so to speak in his blood. He delineated them with a care and lovingness that other painters have reserved for beautiful women. Indeed, there is a sense in which the best of Stubbs's paintings of horses may be considered portraits. That is to say, he did not paint horses in general: he painted them as creatures with distinct personalities. That is one reason that from the late 1750s, Stubbs was so much in demand among well-heeled sportsmen.

Stubbs's pictures of horses that include human beings—*Pumpkin with a Stable Lad* (1774), for example—can be slightly disconcerting precisely because the beast emerges with far more spark and individuality than the man. People in Stubbs's animal pictures are rarely more than stage props. Lemuel Gulliver would have found Stubbs to be the ideal artist to accompany him to the country of the Houyhnhnms. Stubbs did not share Gulliver's misanthropy, but he would have understood his respect for horses.

Paul Mellon began buying pictures by Stubbs in 1936. By the time he died earlier this year at the age of ninety-one, he had assembled the greatest collection of the artist's work anywhere. Mr. Mellon's interest in Stubbs rescued Stubbs from his status as a slightly comic footnote to eighteenth-century English art.

Stubbs was self-taught, and it shows. His art is parochial and idiosyncratic. He commanded considerable technical skill, but he never really mastered the knack of enlivening the whole surface of his paintings or drawings. Memorable though it often is, his art rarely transcends illustration. The subject—be it a horse, a dog, a zebra—gets all of the attention, while the rest of picture is mere background. Stubbs painted a whole series depicting a lion attacking a horse.

Stubbs took extraordinary, almost grotesque, pains to master equine anatomy. As one commentator notes, he "devised a tackle for hauling a horse into lifelike attitudes, after which he proceeded to strip away layer after layer of skin and muscle to the skeleton, making drawings and notes at every stage." Stubbs's only helper in this grisly business was Mary Spencer, his common law wife, who must have been powerfully devoted to her husband to participate in these exercises in flaying.

Stubbs's obsession with anatomy was not confined to horses. In 1795, when he was over seventy, he embarked on an ambitious serious of drawings called "A Comparative Anatomical Exposition of the Structure of the Human Body with that of a Tiger and a Common Fowl." Although it was unfinished at his death in 1806, Stubbs did complete over a hundred drawings for the cycle, more than a dozen of which are on view at Yale. They are ferociously exact without quite being clinical. George Stubbs certainly doesn't represent the pinnacle of Western art, but neither does he occupy those nether regions that so many museums have made unpleasantly familiar to us lately.

—*Roger Kimball*

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Music

Valhalla by the Bay

by David Mermelstein

Richard Wagner assumed that his *Ring des Nibelungen* would become merely a memory after his death, for he could not conceive of anyone else taming his tetralogy's sprawl or tending to its complex mythology. But the composer's wife, Cosima, was not easily discouraged. As her husband's most ardent champion, she could not allow his grandest creation to deliquesce into legend, as the world of the gods does at the conclusion of *Götterdämmerung*. Thus in 1896, thirteen years after her husband's death, and twenty years after the cycle's premiere, Cosima Wagner began a tradition that would over time become one of music's most enduring rituals: reviving the *Ring* at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, the theater Wagner constructed expressly as a showcase for his oeuvre.

Of course, productions of the *Ring* have proliferated outside of Bayreuth practically from the cycle's earliest days. London saw its first *Ring* in 1882, and the American premiere occurred at the Metropolitan Opera in 1889. In the United States, the cycle has enjoyed exceptional popularity, with committed productions cropping up in such unlikely places as Seattle and Arizona.

San Francisco and its well-regarded opera company have their own *Ring* tradition, going back to 1935. And though it took the San Francisco Opera until 1972 to remount the complete cycle, it has been staged three times since, in each case employing Nikolaus Lehnhoff's largely traditional production. Over time, however, his conception has been modified. Lehnhoff was supposedly inspired by the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, but you wouldn't know it to look at the production as interpreted by the Romanian-born director Andrei Serban, placed in charge of staging the latest revival of Lehnhoff's *Ring*.[1] Serban is a director with avant-garde aspirations, and handing him the reins of a fairly traditional production smacks of willful perversity. (Some years ago, Serban directed a post-apocalyptic version of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* in Los Angeles that called to mind a game of chutes and ladders, so steeply raked was the stage and so spare were the sets.) Naturally, Serban wanted to place his own stamp on the *Ring*, but his options were limited. The Lehnhoff/Serban hybrid *Ring* was thus inevitably something of a muddle, a frequently tired-looking conventional staging punctuated by scenes, or occasionally just props, of decidedly modernist bent. But Serban's alterations unexpectedly made a positive impression. Cool and clean, the new designs aptly conveyed Wagner's

1 Four complete cycles of the *Ring* were staged at San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House between June 9 through July 3. I attended the second cycle's *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, the third cycle's *Die Walküre*, and the fourth cycle's *Das Rheingold*. Donald Runnicles conducted cycles one, two, and four; Michael Boder led cycle three.

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dramatic vision. It is hard to imagine the enigmatic Erde's downbeat prophecies in *Rheingold* and *Siegfried* having greater impact than they did here, in the shadow of a large, half-submerged oval mask of vaguely Japanese sensibility. And Serban's vision of the Norns's prologue in *Götterdämmerung* was a model of elegant clarity, with white-robed, white-faced Norns weaving the fraying rope of destiny as darkness enveloped the stage.

Unfortunately, these streamlined high points were uncharacteristic of this production. More often, fussiness and even silliness carried the day. Part of the problem was that Lehnhoff's original production had already been tampered with over the years. Tinkering can improve flawed stagings, of course. But the integrity of a production—good, bad, or indifferent—often falls victim to the intervention. Lehnhoff's effort was a throwback not so much to the brutally spare designs of Wieland Wagner, the postwar touchstone, but rather to the stark naturalism envisioned by Emil Preetorious, whose allegorical designs in the 1930s helped define Winifred Wagner's reign at Bayreuth. Such allegorical ploys, however, can hardly help seeming pretentious, especially in a mishmash realization such as this one. In act I of *Götterdämmerung*, for example, Gunther's castle looked more like an office occupied by Mussolini than the domain of a Gibichung king. And why Serban retained a pair of Baroque portals, thirty feet high, is anyone's guess. A legacy of Lehnhoff's staging, they figured in every one of the four operas's scenes and at no point served to illuminate the action.

Lehnhoff's backdrops, ultimately more reminiscent of Albert Bierstadt's oil paintings than anything by Friedrich, were equally out of place in Serban's conception. Even more damaging were design choices that actively interfered with Wagner's vision. When the giant Fafner, now a dragon (but looking more like the Tyrannosaurus rex in Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*), was slain by Siegfried in act II of *Siegfried*, Serban had him metamorphose back into a giant. It's an interesting idea, to be sure, but one in no way hinted at in either Wagner's music or his libretto. Moreover, as Serban opted to employ two enormous puppets to represent Fafner and his brother Fasolt in *Rheingold*, a limp puppet had to be deployed as the dead Fafner, an effect hardly worth the trouble. (And speaking of things not worth bothering over, a San Francisco Opera fact sheet informs us that Fasolt, at fifteen feet tall, stood a foot shorter than Fafner. In both cases, the singers, Reinhard Hagen and Eric Halfvarson, respectively, occupied the top part of the puppets while stagehands cumbersomely wheeled the edifices about.)

Not all of the effects were disappointing. The third scene in *Rheingold*, during which the avaricious Alberich uses the potent Tarnhelm to transform himself first into a huge serpent and then into a toad, was wondrously evocative. Still, this production of the *Ring* left one feeling that a host of competing design schemes (the Valkyries in midnight-blue evening gowns cavorting as if directed by Busby Berkeley!) unnecessarily distracted from Wagner's attempt at an art form at once overwhelming and cohesive, and that a more uniform and carefully considered series of choices would have better served the tetralogy.

The singing, too, was something of a mixed bag, though a handful of outstanding performances lent much luster to this *Ring*. The seemingly ubiquitous English soprano Jane Eaglen gave audiences a Brünnhilde of impressive sonic power. In *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, her voice sounded fresh, attractive, and full. Lesser mortals might have betrayed strain at some points, but not Eaglen. And yet her portrayals were for the most part interpretively shallow. In the immolation scene near the end of *Götterdämmerung*, her singing was heartfelt and beautiful, but elsewhere Eaglen seemed uninvolved. Her acting was consistently disappointing, her stand-and-deliver approach to the drama a decided drain on excitement. By way of contrast, Deborah

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Voigt, as Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*, proved an invigorating singer. Her vaunted bell-like sound enriched the music, of course, but just as importantly her ardent involvement in stage business enhanced the production. The tenor Mark Baker, as Siegmund, complemented her superbly. He projected well, sang richly, and enunciated crisply.

This production's biggest disappointment came in the form of Wolfgang Schmidt's small-voiced Siegfried. Good Siegfrieds are famously hard to find, but surely the San Francisco Opera could have done better. Throughout *Götterdämmerung*, Schmidt sounded dry and strained. Occasionally, he was even off pitch. In *Siegfried*, Schmidt was slightly better. He even came across as sensitive and almost sweet-voiced in the scene right before Siegfried engages Fafner. Yet the way he ran about after capturing the magical Tarnhelm from the dragon nearly negated the moment. As Mime, Siegfried's protector-cum-nemesis, the Canadian tenor Gary Rideout offered one of this cycle's most memorable portrayals. His crookback Nibelung summoned not only pity, but even sympathy at times. His characterful singing was matched only by that of the baritone Tom Fox, singing Mime's even greedier brother, Alberich. Looking every bit like the ghost of Jacob Marley without the chains, Fox downright inhabited his central role, expressing himself with rich, clarion tones.

The chief rival to the Nibelung brothers, Wotan (disguised as the Wanderer in *Siegfried*) is in some ways the cycle's keystone, for it is as much through his actions as anyone's that matters in the *Ring* come to such a pretty pass. In the bass James Morris, this production had a gifted, nuanced Wotan. Morris has now sung this role (or roles, as Wotan appears in three of the *Ring* operas) in all three incarnations of Lehnhoff's production, and his aptness for the part was everywhere apparent. Indeed, in addition to his deeply satisfying singing, he brought to Wotan a kind of consummate resignation, recalling to some degree the tortured Boris Godunov he offered San Francisco audiences back in 1992.

In the pit, the San Francisco Opera's music director Donald Runnicles, a Wagner specialist, handled the protean demands of Wagner's music with skill and more than a little insight. He proved especially effective at highlighting the vaunted leitmotivs within the scores. Occasionally, dryness crept into the string playing and the brasses flagged a bit, but these are quibbles. Michael Boder led the production's third cycle, and he infused *Die Walküre* with tremendous energy, especially in the opening storm music, which was taut and propulsive in his hands.

Perhaps it is unrealistic to hope that we will ever see an ideal production of Richard Wagner's *Ring*. Too many factors conspire against perfection. Wagner termed the *Ring* a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a "total work of art," whose ambitions were as much mythic or religious as aesthetic. A complicated saga links the constituent parts of the *Ring*, but the four operas can be viewed as distinct works, making it unlikely that one director will possess sufficient vision to realize a *Ring* that simultaneously serves several sometimes contradictory goals. And the vast forces required to mount all four operas in quick succession further work against a unified whole. It is no mean feat to find an excellent Brünnhilde and Siegfried at any time, but to match this couple with an equally fine Sieglinde, Siegmund, Alberich, Mime, and Wotan, to name but a few of the principals needed, requires a degree of good fortune rare in this world. The great pianist Artur Schnabel used to refer to music that is better than it can be played. Wagner's *Ring* is opera better than can be staged. In that light, San Francisco's latest traversals of the cycle were a brave undertaking, necessarily flawed.

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The media

Schlock *Talk*

by James Bowman

"You know," says Hillary Clinton in the premiere issue of Tina Brown's *Talk* magazine, a propos of her husband's fornications with Monica Lewinsky, "in Christian theology there are sins of weakness and sins of malice, and this was a sin of weakness." When I read this, I had not heard of any such distinction between sins. To subdivide them not on the basis of gravity—venial and mortal—but on the putative state of mind of the sinner sounded to me suspiciously modern and based on therapeutic assumptions about human behavior. Like the president's hate-crime legislation. Had not Milton's Samson thundered the definitive answer to such sophistical pleadings when Dalila asked his forgiveness for betraying him to the Philistines on the grounds that such betrayal was "a weakness/ In me but incident to all our sex"?

> . . . If weakness may excuse,
> What murderer, what traitor, parricide,
> Incestuous, sacrilegious, but may plead it?
> All wickedness is weakness: that plea therefore
> With God or man will gain thee no remission.

But a friend told me that the more patriarchal church of Rome, unlike the progressive Milton, does indeed recognize Dalila's plea—a fact which Mrs Clinton must have been at some trouble to discover but which must henceforth be regarded as the very foundation stone of Miss Brown's sort of celebrity journalism. For by this principle, not only can all be forgiven, as Milton realized, save unattractiveness, but also larger-than-life figures can be made to seem more attractively human by their little "weaknesses."

Mrs. Clinton's interviewer, Lucinda Franks, spent many weeks of emollient and sympathetic questioning to bring her to the point of voicing this "reaction" to her husband's infidelity, but her real purpose was to confer upon her something of the heroic status of her husband. In the rest of the article we learn, for instance, that Mrs. Clinton is personally responsible for peace in Northern Ireland, for the liberation and employment of the Arab women of North Africa, and for the humbling of Slobodan Milosevic by NATO's bombers ("I urged him to bomb; I supported him," she tells Miss Franks, raising the veil on the First Couple's pillowtalk. "You cannot let this go on at the end of a century that has seen the major holocaust of our time. What do we have NATO for if not to defend our way of life?").

In other words, Lucinda Franks and Tina Brown got "access" to the First Lady's innermost thoughts and feelings by offering her a completely uncritical forum for their expression. That the result is blatant puffery of course hardly matters to the consumers of celebrity journalism—as the success of Miss Brown's models, *Hello* in Britain and *Olla* in Spain, suggests. *Talk* springs to life fully-formed as the magazine that *The New Yorker* under her tenure could only aspire to

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be—that is, the new and glitzy packaging for a lot of old-fashioned "women's" journalism of the trashiest sort. For this is a cozy, nurturing milieu in which claims not only that the First Lady is a world leader but also that "as the president has tried to make up for what he has done, we've slowly seen a physical passion come back into their lives" and that "she fell in love with him again" on her mission to Morocco are too good to question.

And the piece comes opportunely, as Mrs. Clinton prepares to announce her candidacy for the U.S. Senate in New York—home of *Talk* and Tina and Lucinda Franks and her husband, Robert Morgenthau, the Manhattan District Attorney and political enemy of Mrs. Clinton's likely Republican opponent, Rudolph Giuliani. Both she and Tina Brown's new magazine got a lot of free publicity and everyone was happy, except maybe Mr. Giuliani, until the press picked up Mrs. Clinton's elaboration on her husband's "weakness," in which she explained that it was owing to "abuse" in the form of a childhood conflict between his mother and grandmother. At once she realized she had gone too far and, with typical Clintonian chutzpah, both she and her husband denied she had said what she quite obviously had said.

Or had she? James Carville, the Clinton family lapdog, offered a reward of $100,000 to anyone who could prove "that Hillary Clinton linked the president's sexual misconduct with his childhood." Well, I claim the reward. Here is what Miss Franks writes immediately after Mrs. Clinton is quoted as saying that "this was a sin of weakness":

> I tell Hillary I read his mother's autobiography, in which she wrote about the atmosphere of alcohol, violence, and chaos that forced her son to be the man of the house while he was still a child. Hillary leans over and says softly, "That's only the half of it. He was so young, barely four, when he was scarred by abuse that he can't even take it out and look at it. There was terrible conflict between his mother and grandmother. A psychologist once told me that for a boy being in the middle of a conflict between two women is the worst possible situation. There is always the desire to please each one."

To say that these words in this context do not amount to a "linking" of the sin to the "abuse" is itself an abuse of the language. It is like saying, after you have walked into the Kwik-E-Mart in a stocking mask with a sawed-off shotgun and suggested to the teenager behind the counter that it might be a good idea if he opened up the till: "But I never said, 'This is a stickup!'"

Where have we heard such an abuse of language in the recent past? Why, of course when the president denied that he had lied under oath about his relationship with Miss Lewinsky even though the whole world had witnessed the lie. This is obviously the Clintonite's *modus operandi*: in order to abolish some inconvenient reality you need only deny its existence, repeatedly and emphatically, and eventually fair-minded people may begin to think that those who persist in believing the evidence of their eyes and ears are being "partisan" and unfair. The problem with indiscriminate *Talk*—where Mr. Carville is counted among the "50 Big Mouths We Hope Will Never Shut Up"—is that its enthusiasm for "the conversation" leaves it unprotected against such an unscrupulous exploitation of the presumption of good faith on which all communication depends.

For example, Miss Franks introduces the sensitive matter of Mrs. Clinton's "emotional health" by quoting her as saying that "The best way to judge an administration is not by the way they feel . . . but what they do, how they learn from their mistakes. Personal feelings are not a useful way of judging. Watching people is. That is how I judge people—by their actions." As so often with the Clintons, this is instantly recognizable as the reverse of the truth. If she had judged her husband by his actions rather than what he said about his feelings, she quite obviously would not be giving the in-

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terview, or, if she had, would not have been saying the exculpatory things she was saying. Yet both she and the president seem to think that just saying a thing—as for instance that they judge people by their actions—makes it to some extent true. Close enough for government work!

In the same way, near the end of the article, Miss Franks quotes the Clintonian formula for penitence about not having done anything to prevent the Rwandan genocide of 1994. "We could have assembled a thousand NATO troops and gone into the cities and tried to rout the terrorists," the president is quoted as saying. "We couldn't have helped in the villages—it happened too quickly there—but we could have done more and didn't. And I'll never forgive myself for that." Never forgive himself? He has forgiven himself in the very act of saying that he won't forgive himself! That's the point of his saying it. I'm guilty. I confess. I feel bad. What else is there to say or do? Now it's time to "move on." It was the same pattern of behavior he adopted in the Lewinsky affair after he could no longer deny the relationship.

In other words, the lie is so open, so brazen, that it seems not so much a lie as an attempt to redefine the reality that makes it a lie—like taking endless Mulligans in golf and then exulting that you've shot an 89. There is a sort of boyish charm to this kind of pretense, at least to an age which prides itself on its "compassion" in caring more about people's feelings than the realities that constrain them. That's the therapeutic mindset, which makes it possible for Hillary's falsehood to stand unchallenged as the immediate prelude to that which shows it to be a falsehood, namely her rationale for taking the words and the feelings over the actions in the case of her husband's infidelity—which, she said to Miss Franks,

> "has received an unprecedented amount of attention. You know people have a lot of daily problems in relationships. Everybody has some dysfunction in their families. They have to deal with it. You don't just walk away if you love someone—you help the person."
>
> She turns to me now with a startling intensity. "I don't believe in denying things. I believe in working through it. Is he ashamed? Yes. Is he sorry? Yes. But does this negate everything he has done as a husband, a father, a president?" She elaborated later: "And what is so amazing is that Bill has not been defeated by this. There has been enormous pain, enormous anger, but I have been with him half my life and he is a very, very good man. We just have a deep connection that transcends whatever happens.
>
> "Bill has been subjected to so much abuse," she continues. "He doesn't make any excuses for what he did. But the reaction was unprecedented and harmful to the country. . . . People are mean. I think it's a real disservice, the way we sort of strip away everybody's sense of dignity, of privacy. People need support, not disdain."

And who, at least in the pages of *Talk* magazine, can argue with that? It amounts to her apology for another ludicrous falsehood which precedes it, namely, that "he doesn't make any excuses for what he did"—set in the context of a mass of excuses. The human appeal is meant to make it seem not a lie but a cheerfully accommodating acknowledgment of what the truth should be and perhaps, in some obscure sense known only to her and her fellow Bill-believers, what it actually is. There's "support" for you!

Talk's kind of celebrity journalism depends on such support, as it does on the fact that, to its readers, the First Lady's will to believe must appear more authentic than the president's will to deceive. The latter is half-remembered and merely theoretical in comparison with his wife's human presence to our sympathies, which overwhelms our sense of resentment against not only his lies but also her own. Hillary's rehearsal of her agonies in her marriage and her determination to preserve it at all costs is almost as impervious to criticism as the photo-spread by Peter Beard of John F. Kennedy, Jr. as a

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boy of eleven which the magazine managed to insert at the last minute on the news of his death in a plane crash.

Coincidentally with the debut of *Talk*, the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented an exhibition called "Fame After Photography" which consisted of a lot of old and very boring publicity photos (nothing is as tedious as yesterday's celebrity) and bits of portentous philosophizing to explain why everything has been different since the invention of photography in the mid-nineteenth century. "Viewers focused on appearance," explains the wall-card adjacent to a Daguerreotype, "and began to notice that the famous often looked like they did. The gap that once separated the famous from the not-famous narrowed."

This may or may not be true. How can we possibly know? On the face of it, it would seem that the fact that the famous looked like other people was unlikely to have come as such a surprise as all that. On the contrary, photography has always been more a matter of selection than of representation. It was because these ordinary-looking people had been singled out for attention by having their photographs published that the world learned to regard them as famous, whereupon people began to look for reasons why—a piercing eye or a beautiful nose—fame had smiled on these and not on others. That is to say that the gap between the famous and the not-famous never narrows at one point but it widens at another, since the phenomenon of celebrity depends on a dynamic tension between remoteness and familiarity.

Nowadays, buried as we are under an avalanche of images of the famous, we are more likely to single out for distinction those who successfully avoid the camera—or almost avoid it or die trying to avoid it, like Princess Diana. Fame has become so promiscuous that the top celebrities establish their claim to our regard by disdaining their own celebrity—or at least affecting to do so. That was the burden of many of the eulogies for young John Kennedy. "He loved to travel across the city by subway, bicycle, and Rollerblade," said his Uncle Ted at the funeral. "He lived as if he were unrecognizable, although he was known by everyone he encountered. He always introduced himself, rather than take anything for granted. He drove his own car and flew his own plane, which is how he wanted it. He was the king of his domain."

Such paradoxical anonymity of this commoner-king seems to have made him also a sort of democratic saint, like his father, for although he was distinguished from the common herd by wealth and fame and power he nevertheless managed to seem like other people who had none of these things. Thus *People* magazine noted that at the Caldwell Flight Academy "He'd hang out like everybody else and talk about flying." It had been so since childhood when, we learn, "John never lacked the common touch. Even as a boy, 'when he was on [Onassis's yacht] the *Christina*, he liked to eat in the kitchen with the crew,' says Kiki Moutsatsos, Ari's longtime secretary." The story might remind us of Lucinda Franks's assurance in *Talk* that "the locals" in Ireland "are still remarking about the meeting with Irish women at a fish and chips shop, when Hillary declined a fancy china cup and like everyone else drank tea from a chipped mug."

But, unlike Hillary, who is said by one of "the locals" to have made "the boys" of the IRA "think twice about planting the gelignite," poor John Kennedy had few other accomplishments in life to boast of, save for his hard-won achievement of normality. In *Time*, the stablemate at Time-Warner of *People*, which for years now it has been striving to emulate, Nancy Gibbs wrote that, "If you believe his friends, the most famous son in the world wanted nothing more than to be a normal guy, to put people at ease." Hugh Sidey, another *Time* correspondent and long-time friend of the Kennedy family, wrote that "The special quality about young John Kennedy then may have been simply that he was so normal, so much like our own kids, allowed a

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childhood because of the insistence of his mother Jackie Kennedy and in spite of the formidable environs of the presidential mansion." Indeed, as Sidey does not add but as Uncle Ted came near to suggesting, Kennedy was just like us even in his joining the cult of celebrity-worship with the founding of *George* magazine. This could have been construed as an excellent, self-deprecatory joke, fashioned out of the celebrity that he had been dealt, unwillingly, at birth, but it was also and inescapably a way of reaffirming his own identity as one in the fraternity of celebrity. What small degree of viability the magazine ever had (and the probability is that it will now be closed by the end of the year) depended on the fact that JFK, Jr., unlike other journalists, could always depend on having his phone calls returned.

Tina Brown's own celebrity may not be of quite this order of magnitude, but it was great enough to overawe Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post*, who feebly put forward for her consideration the proposition that "some see a certain coziness toward the Clintons" in a magazine with so many ties to the Friends of Bill. A certain coziness? Anyone who reads Lucinda Franks on Hillary Clinton and thinks she demonstrates no more than "a certain coziness" is a near-illiterate. As Kurtz is obviously not that, we must suppose that he, like most of those who write about Miss Brown, is simply paying respect to her enormous power and importance in the media world on which he reports.

At the same time, he is engaging in exactly the same sort of celebrity journalism as that by which she has achieved that importance. The bigger the celebrity, the more you have to flatter her with questions like this, which she can easily bat down, in order to gain her cooperation. Tina Brown's understanding of this principle (and presumably her own place in the hierarchy of celebrity) is what got her the interview with Hillary Clinton. But Tina Brown is no mere sycophant. The tone of *Talk* from beginning to end and in respect of great celebrities and small—and even those of almost no celebrity at all—is almost as fawning and "supportive" as Lucinda Franks is of Hillary Clinton. The great insight on which the magazine is based, and which might save it from the fate of *George*, is that the Warholian future in which everybody is a celebrity for fifteen minutes has already arrived.

At least everybody worth reading about. At least for five minutes, which is about how long it takes to read each of the items in "the conversation," *Talk*'s showcase for fine writing about minor or intermediate celebrities, or those who ought to be celebrities. "When you walk into Isaac Tigrett's house in Sherman Oaks, California," writes Peter Maas of one of the co-founders of the Hard Rock Cafe chain, "you feel you are entering a church whose pastor has a spiritual version of multiple-personality disorder. Tibetan prayer flags hang from the rafters of the living room, not far from a trio of Buddhas, placid and golden, that stand like sentries beside a large oil painting of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Across the room is a bronze plaque from Myanmar inscribed with gold-lettered Sanskrit prayers. If you look outside, through the windows, you will notice an ancient Egyptian statue of Sekhmet, the lion-headed warrior goddess, presiding over Tigrett's swimming pool."

I don't know anything about Mr. Tigrett beyond what Mr. Maas tells me, but my guess is that he's not going to be objecting to this representation of himself. In fact, a man who puts up such a collection of artefacts and icons around his house is probably hoping that they will be noticed and remarked upon in just the way that they are noticed and remarked upon here. In the same way, someone using the cute pseudonym of Vox Talkuli (could it be Tina herself?), retails an old and almost certainly apocryphal anecdote about the late A. J. Ayer, the diminutive philosopher, who once claimed to have confronted Mike Tyson, the boxer, as he was in the process of attempting to rape Naomi Campbell, the supermodel.

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The way I heard the story, it was Tyson's then-wife, Robin Givens, the actress, and he was not raping her but knocking her about, but either way the point of the story is the same and equally flattering to Ayer. "Do you know who the f*** I am?" Tyson is supposed to have said to him. "I'm the heavyweight champion of the world."

"And I am the former Wykeham Professor of Logic," Ayer is said to have replied. "We are both preeminent in our fields; I suggest we talk about this like rational men." Mr. (or possibly Ms.) Talkuli continues: "A conversation ensued, and Campbell slipped out unharmed. A conversation! If simple talk can prevent a brazen old aesthete from being beaten to death by a hotheaded young heavyweight, surely there is something to it. And yet so often in the telling of history, conversation is overlooked . . ." Well, conversation by which a B.O.A. is prevented from being beaten to death by an H.Y.H. at any rate. Other sorts of conversations do from time to time make their appearance, sometimes with even more plausibility, "in the telling of history."

To describe Ayer as an "old aesthete" suggests that this self-mythologizing anecdote may be the only thing that Vox Talkuli knows about him—though brazen he certainly was. The "conversation," we are thus given to understand, is pretty superficial, an impression which the rest of the articles in the section do little to dispel. The point of them isn't to tell us anything not apparent on the surface of these self-defined lives but simply to make us feel that we are acquainted with them—and that they are worth being acquainted with. That is Tina Brown's contribution to the celebrity culture: to reassure us that we know not only the big celebrities like Hillary Clinton and JFK, Jr. and Gwyneth Paltrow and George W. Bush, all of whose images appear on the cover, but also the demi-celebrities whom those less closely attuned to the fashionable world haven't even recognized yet.

These include Kenny Mayne, a sports commentator on ESPN who has distinguished himself in the view of Jonathan Mahler for coming up with new ways of telling people that a home run has been hit—for example, "I am the king of the diamond! Let there be an abundant clubhouse feast! Bring me the finest meats and cheeses in all the land!" William Monahan's tribute to Gloucester, Massachussetts shows that places can be celebrities as well as people: "There is probably not a single place as critical to the development of American visual and literary art as Gloucester, Massachusetts," he begins, and continues to make his point not just in terms of old-fashioned civic boosterism but also in those of literary criticism, as when he criticizes Kipling's *Captains Courageous* for not having enough about Gloucester in it.

The point is that we wouldn't know, if it weren't for Miss Brown's invaluable magazine, that Gloucester was hip, if not necessarily "the artistic omphalos of the United States." But the relentless superficiality of such writing finally wears us down. By the time we get to "Book City" ("Life Between the Covers") at the back of the magazine, even those of us who are still well-disposed to Martin Amis, for example, are unlikely to welcome his thoughts on *Hannibal*, the new novel by Thomas Harris—though in fact these thoughts are sharp and well-written and justly appraise the latest if not the earlier rubbish from Harris's pen ("Harris has become a serial murderer of English sentences, and *Hannibal* is a necropolis of prose"). But in this context, it wouldn't have mattered if Amis had liked the book or not. On the same principle that all publicity is good publicity, all reviews in *Talk* are good reviews—and, sure enough, Amis himself acknowledges in his conclusion that *Hannibal* is a novel of "profound and virtuoso vulgarity." Perfect, in other words, for the readers of *Talk*.

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Books

Supporting the indispensable

by Peter Coleman

I sat in on only one meeting of the board of the International Association for Cultural Freedom, the uneasy successor to the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which had collapsed in 1967 amid the disclosure that the CIA had been funding its activities. This was in Paris in June 1970, the twentieth anniversary almost to the week of the foundation of the Congress in the British sector of occupied Berlin. Representing *Quadrant*, the Australian monthly, I sat among the observers with the other editors: Melvin Lasky (*Encounter*), Leopold Labedz (*Survey*), François Bondy (*Preuves*), Rajat Neogy (*Transition*)—recently released from a Kampala prison—and Hoki Ishihara (*Jiyu*).

The morning began slowly with dispiriting reports on cultural freedom from India and Indonesia to Uganda and Nigeria and some proposals for estimable seminars. But the meeting flared into life in a sharp confrontation between the French poet Pierre Emmanuel and Labedz, whose *Survey* was one of the splendors of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. In both anger and anguish, Labedz complained that the International Association would not face the facts of its failures. There had been no "end of ideology," he said, no "convergence" in the Cold War, no liberalization in the USSR, no new "world-wide community of intellectuals." Instead, there had been "a long march through the institutions" that threatened to destroy the universities, politicize cultural life, and appease the Soviet Union. We had no answer to the barbarism of the New Left. Throughout the 1950s, the Congress had exposed the Soviet Union and its fellow travelers. But now we were détentistes—to the despair of writers, artists, and intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain. We lacked, he concluded, our former clarity of purpose.

In the tense silence that followed, Edward Shils suggested an adjournment. The next morning, Pierre Emmanuel replied on behalf of the board. A long-bearded poet-prophet, he spoke—for precision, he said—in French. We had all been moved, he began, "par l'accent passionné de notre ami Labedz." Yet he could not agree with him. He welcomed the New Left, despite its violence. It was trying to fill a spiritual emptiness in life: "the man who lands on the moon is a man of nothing." His own son-in-law in Latin America had, he said, became a Maoist apostle of tabula rasa, of a new beginning from zero. We must not turn away from these young people. But if we are not to be mere *tricheurs*, what are we to tell them? We cannot just talk about the barbarism of the New Left.

Discussion was desultory and inconclusive, and the chairman Alan Bullock soon moved to other business. The minutes record: "No consensus emerged." It was an epiphanic moment and summed up for me the tensions within the Congress/International Association since its foundation. A movement of and for liberals and social democrats, it was always split between its

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anti-Communists and its non-Communists, between its Cold Warriors and its accommodationists. The former prevailed in the first and successful years and the latter in the years of decline.

The opposing assessments of the Congress were clear enough over thirty years ago when the controversy over CIA funding first exploded. Its partisans pointed to its role in the defeat of Stalinism; its critics claimed its influence was small. The one saw it as a story of idealism and courage, the other as a gravy train. The one shrugged off CIA funding, the other insisted it was the real theme. *Pecunia non olet*, cried one: money doesn't smell. He who pays the piper calls the tune, replied the other.

My book *The Liberal Conspiracy: The Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Struggle for the Mind of Postwar Europe* (Free Press, 1989) acknowledged the Congress's historic success. Now, a new book by Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, brings up to date the contemptuous, leftist perspective.[1] Since the CIA is her story, she sets out to trace its tentacular reach from Hollywood to MOMA, from Radio Free Europe to PEN International. Her research has delivered some new names, for example, Lawrence de Neufville, the CIA official who recruited Michael Josselson to administer the Congress. She also provides some amusing odds and ends (CIA agents, she says, wrote Fodor travel guides as a cover) and some scuttlebutt (Sonia Orwell is one target).

Saunders also revisits the curious case of Tom Braden, the officer who put together the International Organizations Division in the CIA and later published the most destructive of all the attacks on the Congress for Cultural Freedom. This attack was an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* of May 20, 1967 giving details of CIA funding of student, labor, and cultural organizations, and boasting that it had an "agent" in *Encounter*. The Congress was dissolved soon after the article's appearance. (An editor in Uganda was jailed and one in Japan had his home bombed. In India, the government ordered an inquiry.) Since Braden had signed a secrecy agreement and the CIA had weeks of notice of the article, why had it not taken steps to restrain him before publication or punish him afterwards? Saunders speculates that the CIA may have wanted to be rid of the liberal congress and used Braden. She quotes John Hunt who worked for both the Congress and the CIA: "Maybe [Richard] Helms called him and said 'I've got a job for you.'" Another view is that Braden actually thought his article would help the Congress: its title—"I'm Glad the CIA is 'Immoral'"—was crude but not without bravado.

The persistent weakness of *Who Paid the Piper?* is Saunders's restricted research and imagination. She seems to have no foreign languages; she does not cite Michael Hochgeschwender's major study of the Congress in Germany—*Freiheit in der Offensive?* (1998)—or Pierre Gremion's valuable anthology *Preuves, une révue européenne à Paris* (1989). More significantly, she has no grasp of the nature of the Cold War tensions of the late 1940s when Communists and their fellow travellers expected soon to be able to welcome Stalin's tanks in the streets of Paris and Rome, and many non-Communist intellectuals thought it prudent to adapt to this supposed wave of the future. But some, especially the old refugees from fascist and Communist concentration camps who rallied to the Congress for Cultural Freedom in 1950, were prepared to resist and, if necessary, to go down fighting.

The threat of a world-wide Gulag has receded, and with it the passion of the Cold Warriors. But for Saunders most of them were always ridiculous if not fraudulent figures. She speaks with some generosity of Michael Josselson, the presiding genius of the Congress and a CIA man—she was probably under the influence of his widow Diana Josselson whom she especially thanks

1 *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, by Frances Stonor Saunders; Granta Books, 509 pages, £20.

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(no doubt to Mrs. Josselson's distress) for her time and help. But she describes the distinguished writer and editor Melvin Lasky as "lupine," "ill-mannered," and "oily." Nicholas Nabokov, she says, "faked" a heart episode. Stephen Spender only pretended to be "watery" and "silly" to get what he wanted. According to her, Lionel Trilling was "a pathetic anglophile"; Whittaker Chambers "elevated the art of snitching to new heights" (while Alger Hiss, of course, was not a spy!); and the classic book *The God That Failed* was a "sham."

Saunders's basic theme is that the CIA was a great corrupter. It funded the Congress for Cultural Freedom, treated it as a front, and placed men in key positions to ensure control. But what is her evidence? To win over the world's intellectuals to the liberal democratic cause, the Congress developed four programs—international conferences and festivals; national committees; a network of magazines of high quality and small circulation; and support for intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain.

Saunders's case is strongest in relation to the conferences and seminars. While some were of high standards and put important themes and phrases into general circulation ("the end of ideology," economic growth, destalinization, the Third World), most of the debates were mediocre. Yet their main point was not Socratic dialogue—there wasn't any—but the informal, personal encounters across national boundaries. After one conference in Bombay, W. H. Auden said that these encounters, "even if forgotten, may enter the structure and fabric of one's being." They intimated the emergence of a world-wide liberal community, and only fools or philistines would dismiss this as unimportant. The national committees were more pragmatic. The most active of all (with Sidney Hook, James T. Farrell, and Diana Trilling) was in New York and was no CIA tool. It was in permanent conflict with the Congress in Paris and—as Saunders shows—the CIA acknowledged its turbulent independence. The same is true, if less dramatically, of the Indian and Australian committees, but Saunders does not mention them. The Congress's Central European Program—books and subscriptions, travel and publication in the West for writers of the Soviet bloc, and help for refugees starting a new life—was an unqualified success. Raymond Aron thought it was the most influential of all the Congress programs. But it does not fit Saunders's theme and she does not mention it, either.

The network of excellent "little magazines" such as *Encounter*, *Survey*, *Preuves*, and *Der Monat* was another great achievement. As evidence that the CIA controlled these publications, Saunders once more recalls *Encounter*'s widely debated rejection of an article by Dwight Macdonald attacking American life. The truth is, however, that the piece was rejected not because it was critical of America—*Encounter* routinely carried more telling criticism of America (by, for example, Bertrand Russell and Aldous Huxley)—but because it was a poor article. The angry exchanges on editorial policy in the 1950s between the editor Irving Kristol and Michael Josselson show beyond doubt the independence of *Encounter*.

Saunders does not even suggest control, actual or attempted, over Labedz's *Survey*, let alone over smaller magazines such as Michael Polanyi's *Science and Freedom* (England), James McAuley's *Quadrant* (Australia), Nissim Ezekiel's *Quest* (India), or Rajat Neogy's *Transition* (Uganda). She appears not to have read *Der Monat* or *Preuves*. This world-wide network with its unruly editors published many of the most independent writers of the day—Raymond Aron, Daniel Bell, Isaiah Berlin, Albert Camus, Robert Conquest, Stuart Hampshire, Arthur Koestler, Walter Laqueur, Richard Lowenthal, Czeslaw Milosz, Edward Shils, H. R. Trevor-Roper, Lionel Trilling, George Urban . . . the list goes on and on. In their contribution to understanding totalitarianism in a period of lies and illusion, these magazines were compulsory reading. They are still a rich historical resource.

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When there was talk of closing down *Encounter* at the time of the CIA controversy in the late 1960s, forty of England's leading writers from Kingsley Amis to Arnold Wesker signed a letter to the editor Melvin Lasky describing the magazine as "indispensable" and concluding: "our support remains undiminished." Saunders does not mention this letter. Irving Kristol once said to me that it had been easy to found *Encounter* in 1953 because "There was nothing to read in England then." What is one to say today, now that *Encounter* is gone?

It was clearly a bad idea to have the bills paid by a secret service. Yet there was no alternative in the emergency of 1949–1950. At that crucial moment, some of America's leaders saw the importance of helping anti-Communist liberals work out their ideas without interference. They should be honored for it, although not for continuing the secret funding for seventeen years. George F. Kennan summed up the situation with his familiar perspicacity and balance:

> It is unfair that it [the CIA] should be so bitterly condemned for its failures, and should then go unpraised when it does something constructive and sensible. And the Congress [for Cultural Freedom] would itself have been remiss if it had failed to take money which came to it from good intent and wholly without strings or conditions.

It is symptomatic of the shabbiness of *Who Paid the Piper?* that Saunders should dismiss Kennan as an agent of corruption and a Cold Warrior.

Oh, to be in England

Ian Buruma Anglomania.
Random House, 304 pages, $25.95

reviewed by Brooke Allen

During the course of reading Ian Buruma's *Anglomania*, I left it lying on the kitchen table where a friend picked it up and looked it over. This friend is a writer in his late thirties, scion of an old and distinguished New England literary family, WASPS and Anglophiles all. "Anglomania?" he asked dismissively. "Who pays any attention to England any more?"

Who indeed? Not many people outside of England itself, which is one of the points made in this intelligent, funny, erudite history of Anglophilia—and Anglophobia—from Voltaire's day to our own. Buruma, author of books on Germany and Japan and a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Institute for the Humanities, has special qualifications for telling this particular story. Although his father was Dutch and Buruma himself was raised in the Hague, his mother was English, a source of pride for the boy. "Through the late 1940s and 1950s, and even in the 1960s, the British were considered a superior breed in places like the Hague," he writes; "to me, a visit to Holland by my grandparents felt like the arrival of messengers from a wider, more glamorous world."

The patriotism of his grandparents, though, was far more than the arrogance of a master race, or the snobbery that has long been one of the less attractive faces of Anglophilia. Bernard and Win Schlesinger were both the children of German Jewish immigrants, and they fervently embraced the customs of the country that had given them asylum and freedom. "To them," Buruma writes, "the self-regarding clichés about Britain—fairness, liberty, tolerance, and so on—were not clichés." Not that the British, of course, were above the occasional anti-Semitic slur. But "Bernard Schlesinger was too proud and too patriotic to complain of prejudice. It would not have fitted his ideal of England." The Schlesingers themselves lived up to that ideal and then some, providing a home for twelve Jewish children who fled Hitler's Germany and even inviting, in 1945, two German POWS to join them for Christmas dinner.

It is the England that embodied "a particular idea of freedom" that Buruma celebrates in this volume: the country that

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provided refuge for French Protestants after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, for French aristocrats after 1789, for European radicals and revolutionaries after the failed uprisings of 1848, for Jews from the late nineteenth century far into the twentieth. The mystery—and it was one that never ceased to perplex continental liberals—was that England, while indubitably the freest society in Europe, was also boring and conservative, crass and commercial, insular and philistine. As Karl Marx observed, in Britain even the workers were bourgeois. The press, the freest in the world, was also the most vulgar—as it continues to be. Cause or effect? The Russian radical Alexander Herzen, who found his British exile so agreeable that he took to calling himself "the old Putneyman," wondered whether perhaps "only a people incapable of inner freedom could manage to have a liberal form of government." "It is a peculiar paradox," Buruma continues, "that only a nation of inhibited conformists could live in freedom, that only a natural order based on custom and tradition could produce and sustain liberal institutions."

It is a question at the very center of this book, and one that has never been satisfactorily answered. Buruma refers to it as "Voltaire's coconuts," a nod to Voltaire's theory (a wishful one, perhaps) that there is no reason the successful political institutions of one country might not be transplanted to another, as coconuts are transplanted from one climate to another. The opposite outlook is the so-called "organic" view, held by skeptical souls like Montesquieu, Herder, and Taine: in their opinion, political institutions are the products of geographic, historical, and social conditions peculiar to each country and cannot easily be planted in foreign soil; laws, charters, and institutions, Taine claimed, are "like a complex of deep and branching invisible roots."

Which theory is correct? The result of imitating British institutions abroad, Taine claimed (this was in the late nineteenth century), had been "grotesque"—except in the Netherlands and Scandinavia. Giuseppe Mazzini, when asked in 1849 to lead the new Roman republic, tried to institutionalize British liberties; the republic collapsed after a hundred days. In our own century, the record of most of Britain's former colonies in Asia and Africa in their experiment with parliamentary government has not been stellar, to say the least. The United States, Canada, and Australia have succeeded: but then, they were populated predominantly by Englishmen in the first place. And as Buruma points out, American liberalism has in any case long since parted ways with its British progenitor, becoming "more active, more enthusiastic, more 'progressive.' From a conservative guarantee of individual rights it became an instrument to improve society."

Voltaire was the first publicly passionate Anglophile; unlike the snobbish variety, he did not admire English manners so much as English political moderation. He did not commit the essential error of confusing liberty with egalitarianism, as did the French revolutionaries later in the century. "All the citizens of a state cannot be equally powerful," he wrote, firmly, "but they may be equally free." Free trade was an integral part of the society he idealized. The Royal Exchange, he wrote in *Letters Concerning the English Nation*, was a "place more venerable than many courts of justice, where the Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian transact together as tho' they all profess'd the same religion, and give the name of Infidel to none but bankrupts."

Voltaire's enthusiasm kicked off a French fad for all things English—philosophy, sport, garden-parks, even food—that crested in the 1760s, with the sage and his lover Emilie du Chatelet holding court at their Champagne estate, Cirey (or Cireyshire, as it was nicknamed). But while Voltaire's influence on England's public image was important enough, its principal legacy has been to serve as a flattering mirror in which the English themselves have preened ever since, for on the continent the French Revolution and the excesses of the Terror

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soon brought about an Anglophobe reaction, with Voltaire and the English liberty he championed perceived as far more radical than in fact they ever were.

Buruma presents a veritable menagerie of Anglophiles: Goethe, who revered Shakespeare as a "Gothic," Nordic, and above all un-French genius, but classicized him thoroughly in his Weimar productions; Prince Hermann von Puckler-Muskau, who spread the Continental mania for the "natural" English garden-park (as opposed to the formal French variety); Theodor Herzl, who envisioned a new society in which every Jew could be just like an English gentleman; and Pierre, Baron de Coubertin, the organizer of the first modern Olympic Games, who believed that his country's pride and vigor could be restored after the Franco-Prussian War through a program of *pedagogie sportive à l'Anglais*, and who upon visiting Rugby College dropped to his knees on the hallowed tomb of Thomas Arnold.

Buruma throws in a couple of influential Anglophobes for good measure. Karl Marx, for example, despised everything England stood for but was more or less stuck there from 1849 until his death in 1883 since any other government would have clapped him in jail. Buruma's description of his tombstone, deep within the indignity of the quintessentially bourgeois Highgate cemetery, is masterly. The most colorful Anglophobe, though, is Kaiser Wilhelm II, whose tortuous, even Freudian feelings for his mother's native land would help bring about the wreckage of the First World War. His mother, Vicky, dutiful daughter of Queen Victoria, had drummed into him the inherent superiority of her country; he "never quite got England out of his blood. It would always be the country whose respect he craved," but never received. His response, of course, was to turn from the constitutional principles of one powerful grandfather, Prince Albert, whose Voltairean dream had been to transplant England's liberal institutions to Germany, to the autocratic ones of the other, the bellicose Wilhelm I. "In a nation where nationhood grew more and more confused with race, the Kaiser was never able to reconcile the blood of two nations running through his veins. He was both an Anglophile and an Anglophobe, and his peculiar psychodrama shows what catastrophes can happen when a neurotic obsession with national identity takes the wrong turn."

Nowadays, of course, the British are no longer considered a superior breed—"even in the Hague," as Buruma notes rather wistfully. Britain's outsized boots have been filled, for better or worse, by the United States, which has inherited not only its global role but also the international onus that playing such a role—or choosing not to play it—always incurs. "Those who would have hated Britain for its commercialism, its individualism, and its tolerance of inequality will hate America today," Buruma remarks, with truth. He describes Britain in its heyday not only as a uniquely free society but as one "of great social and economic inequality, cruel penal codes, cultural philistinism, barbarous mobs, and insular attitudes to the outside world." Every one of these charges, of course, might just as easily be laid at the door of the United States.

Britain's other historical role, her self-imposed one of maintaining and ensuring the balance of power in Europe, has left her with a vastly diminished sense of mission and even of national identity in the era of European union, for since at least Tudor times she has enjoyed a vision of herself as a valiant little island, champion of liberty against every continental tyrant from Philip II to Hitler (via Louis XIV and Napoleon). Hence Britain's deep, and understandable, reluctance to submerge herself in the new Europe. In the long fight over membership in the European Union, though, an unattractive and not really pertinent note of nativism has too often tainted the dialogue, with pinstripe-clad anti-Europe politicians presenting a gross caricature of "Englishness." Buruma likens all these pinstripes and polka dots to lederhosen and the Highland kilt, both nineteenth-century creations

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meant to afford "something native to hang on to while its political institutions were being swallowed up. There seems to be a rule of thumb: when political identities weaken, native costumes get louder." The answer, he believes, does not lie in cultivating a moribund façade of Englishness, national identity, and divine mission. "Britain cannot cultivate its allies by fighting 'Europe' in the spirit of Dunkirk. For European democracies to survive, Europeans must regain the confidence to govern themselves and that course is not helped by the notion that only Britain, by some historic miracle, has the organic, homegrown political traditions to sustain a liberal state. For Europe to become more Anglophile, the Anglophile myth must go."

For all the enormous differences between Britain and the United States, the parallels between the two nations, both as political structures and world powers, are remarkable. Our own situation is in some respects eerily similar to that of Great Britain a hundred years ago. And while the subject of Buruma's book is England's political zenith—from the period between the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and, roughly, the 1950s—its implications are more universal. England's one-time place in the world has a great deal to tell us about our own. A cursory once-over of *Anglomania*'s cover might give the impression, as it did to my friend, that its subject is quaint and anachronistic; but that impression would be very wrong.

Nubile savage

Ernest Hemingway True at First Light: A Fictional Memoir. Edited with an introduction by Patrick Hemingway, Scribner, 320 pages, $26

reviewed by Jeffrey Meyers

In 1953 Hemingway and his fourth wife returned to the scene of his safari with his second wife in 1933. *Look* subsidized the trip with lavish fees: $15,000 for a picture story of the hunting, with photos by Earl Theisen, and another $10,000 for a 3500-word article that appeared in the magazine in January 1954. The government of Kenya, then a British colony, persuaded Philip Percival (who'd hunted with Teddy Roosevelt and with Hemingway on the first safari) to come out of retirement in the hope of reviving tourism which was being threatened by the Mau Mau rebellion.

After the safari, Percival, Theisen, Hemingway's son Patrick, and his Cuban friend Mayito Menocal—who'd actually shot the leopard that Hemingway posed with on the cover of *Look*—went home, and Hemingway was left alone with his wife Mary and a cadre of loyal retainers. The action of this "fictional memoir" takes place from November 30 to December 20, at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro on the Kenya-Tanganyika border. In a letter to me of August 24, 1983, Denis Zaphiro, the game warden of the Kajiado District—who appears in the book under the affectionate nickname of G.C. (Gin Crazed)—described Hemingway's habits and tastes: "Ernest was not all that interested in shooting—except lion. He did not, for instance, shoot or even want to shoot an elephant. After everyone had left, he preferred to drive around and look at the animals. He didn't shoot his lion on either occasion. He loved Africa. He loved to sit in it and watch it. He had a natural knowledge of what animals would do and where they would be. He was always reading, reading. Carried soft covers and papers and magazines in his pockets all the time. He read whenever the pace slowed."

The original version of *True at First Light*, written between 1954–56, was 850 manuscript pages or some 200,000 words. Ten years after Hemingway's death, in December 1971 and January 1972, *Sports Illustrated* published 55,000 words with the bland title "An African Journal." Patrick Hemingway has condensed and edited the original to 100,000 words, which is still far too long and repetitive. Hemingway didn't seem to know where the book was going or how to finish it.

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No one at Scribners, which has earned millions and millions of dollars from Hemingway's books, has bothered to open a dictionary and check his notoriously inaccurate spelling of foreign words. Not only does Patrick's grammar break down in the long sentence on page eight, but many words are printed incorrectly; "Thessinger" for "Thesiger," "numero" for "numéro," "dusk" for "dust," "Milanesa" for "Milanese," "liberta" for "libertà," "triomfera" for "trionfara," and "Campostella" for "Campostela."

Instead of inventing from knowledge, as in his brilliant African stories—"The Snows of Kilimanjaro" and "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (both 1936)—or finding a new autobiographical technique to deal with the African experience, Hemingway merely repeats in *First Light* the old faults of *Green Hills of Africa* (1935). With inflated egoism, he recounts his own and Mary's exploits, patronizes the loyal and stupid sons of cannibals, and is greatly revered by the servants he pays to admire him. Edmund Wilson, as usual, was deadly accurate when he observed that Hemingway "is likely to become fatuous or maudlin as soon as he begins to write in the first person." In *Green Hills*, at least, his malicious comments on writers and books were stimulating. In *First Light*, he makes few significant comments and merely mentions the authors he's been reading: Virgil, Machiavelli, Duff Cooper, Alan Paton, and Georges Simenon. His allusions to Ouida, Kipling, Rupert Brooke, and Lord Nelson's last words are more amusing.

Hemingway's digressions are often more interesting than the main text. His account of meeting Orwell at the Ritz Hotel in Paris in February-March 1945 (when they were both war correspondents) confirms what he told the journalist Harvey Breit and what Orwell told the Canadian poet Paul Potts. "He was very gaunt and looked in bad shape," Hemingway writes, "and I asked him if he would not stay and eat." Orwell wanted to borrow a pistol because "They" were after him, and Hemingway provided the weapon from his small arsenal. But he patronized Orwell, while doubting the danger, and offered to protect him: "I could give him a couple of people who could look after him if 'They' were after him." But Orwell had good reason to be afraid. The Russian secret police had hunted him in Spain and, after *Homage to Catalonia*, considered him an even more dangerous enemy. When the Germans were defeated and the Communists emerged from underground, a lot of people were shot.

The main themes of *First Light* are Mary's hunt for a black-maned lion, which has to be killed, as if to compensate for Hemingway's *faux* leopard, according to his unwritten code; the threat of the Mau Mau; the danger of marauding elephants; and Hemingway's courtship of the African girl, Debba. But Mary is no Margot Macomber and her pursuit of the lion is insignificant; the Mau Mau, operating north of Nairobi, never materialize; the elephants are a ruse to lure Hemingway away and leave the camp undefended; and his pursuit of Debba—in the book as in real life—never gets beyond *frottage*. In short, nothing much happens. As expectations are raised but not satisfied, Hemingway is constantly "engaged in that characteristic occupation of men, planning the operation which will never take place."

Hemingway insists on calling his wife Miss Mary, which tries to make her virginal when she's had many lovers and several husbands. She's a dull character, constantly bitching at him because she has to hunt the lion *his* way. He, in turn, mawkishly portrays her as "good and fine and brave," "beautifully sculptured, compact, irascible and lovely Miss Mary with the head like an Egyptian coin, the breasts from Rubens." She's built, he claims, like Debba—though Debba is about fifteen and Mary is forty-five. He also gives us an account of their thrice-a-night lovemaking, which he compares to "a shower of meteors on a cold night." In reality, Hemingway treated Mary very badly. Her greatest strength was her ability to keep up with his drinking (she died an alcoholic) and to endure a lot of punish-

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ment. He slyly reveals her limitations when he describes Lawrence's view of the Indians and she foolishly asks: "Which Lawrence were you talking about, D. H. or T. E.?" Her insistent desire to fly to the Belgian Congo led to the two disastrous plane crashes that took place in January 1954 (right after this book ends), destroyed his health, and propelled him on the path to suicide.

Things pick up a bit when Mary flies to Nairobi to buy Christmas presents and Hemingway is free to pursue Debba, whom Mary tolerated (she had no choice) but naturally disliked. He admires Debba's lovely impudence, the way she butts her head against his chest when they meet and her maidenly breasts: "the two lovely hills that she carried so proudly and modestly." He fancies that she sometimes imitates the behavior of Queen Elizabeth at her recent coronation and sometimes reminds him of the Indians of his youth in the Michigan woods. He speaks Spanish to her, his language of intimacy, though she doesn't understand a word. Debba, like Mary, loves him for the things he buys for her in the local store.

Though Hemingway had mocked the white settlers who wore pistols in the bars of the Nairobi hotels and said it was "the only way they can feel something hard against their legs," he likes to have Debba "feel the embossing on the old leather holster of my pistol" and rest her hand on his private parts. He amuses himself with Debba when he's bored with Mary. Instead of describing their lovemaking, which makes him feel guilty, he emphasizes his frustration when her vigilant mother prevents them from sleeping together "on the day in my life which offered the most chances of happiness."

When the publication of this book was announced, some English newspapers, desperate for an angle, rang me up to ask if Hemingway was really serious about taking the Nubile Savage as a second wife. Zaphiro had punctured the romantic pretense by calling her "an evil-smelling bit of camp trash." Debba was part of Hemingway's attempt to get back in touch with the primitive forces of Africa. Though going native was especially frowned upon during the Mau Mau rebellion, he shaved his head, dyed his clothes the rusty Masai color, hunted with a Masai spear and fancied himself a polygamous African warrior. (Mary warned: "You get too tribal for your own good.") Conrad's darker, more suggestive description in *Heart of Darkness* of Kurtz's mistress standing on the jungly shore as Marlow steams up the Congo River is the real thing: "along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman . . . she was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent, there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress." Hemingway's absurd courtship is just self-mockery. His real connection with the primitive occurs when he's tracking a leopard and puts a sharp bone fragment from the wounded animal in his mouth ("I did it without thinking"). As it cuts the inside of his cheek, he writes, "I could taste the familiarity of my own blood now mixed with the blood of the leopard."

The faults of this book are obvious, its merits more subtle, and *True at First Light* calls for some critical discrimination. It has a weak and wobbly structure. Most chapters begin mechanically with waking up and eating, and end with drinking and going to sleep. There's an excess of pidgin Swahili, which soon becomes wearisome. Hemingway's daughter-in-law told me that his speech in this book, a mixture of the trivial and ponderous, is exactly the way he spoke —and that's exactly the problem. He should have heeded Gertrude Stein's admonition: "Remarks are not literature. Begin over again and concentrate."

Unlike many readers, I don't mind Hemingway and Mary killing animals, but it's awfully tedious to hear their self-justifications. "He's my lion," Mary insists, "and I love him and respect him and I have to kill him." But there's no categorical imperative. She *has* to kill him only because she's paid a lot of money to do so. Hemingway writes

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that "I lay down by the lion and talked to him very softly in Spanish and begged his pardon for us having killed him and while I lay beside him I felt for the wounds." After the lion is skinned white and naked, Mary states: "He's dignified again as when he was alive," as if her killing confers dignity, not death. But as Hemingway observes, in a rare moment of lucidity, "All Great White Hunters were touching about how they loved the game and hated to kill anything." It would be more honest to admit that they're both driven by bloodthirsty egoism.

The great strengths of the book, apart from the primitivistic theme, are the descriptions of the Rift Valley landscape and the wild animals, his acute reflections about guilt, drink, and loss, and his mixing memory and desire (as in the great flashbacks of "Kilimanjaro") while recalling the glorious days in Michigan, Paris, and the Rockies, and "towns with only one street [that] make the same feeling as a small boat, a narrow channel, the headwaters of a river or the trail up over a pass."

The best passages are tempered by his classic virtues: intense curiosity, passion for learning and for mastery, testing of himself and others. He compares waiting to hunt to a matador waiting for a bullfight, then captures the excitement of pursuing the animals: "I jumped for the handlehold by the front seat as the rhino came smashing out through the vines and creepers." A wounded lion disappears like an actor behind a curtain: "He was into the grass now and only his head and shoulders showed; then only his head; the grass swaying and closing behind him." After the kill, the wildebeest (unlike the skinned lion) "had no dignity and lay there glassy-eyed and big-bellied, his head at an absurd angle, his gray tongue protruding, like a hanged man." As the vultures watch the lions feed on a zebra, he reveals the true rapacity of nature: "they stayed in the trees but the closest ones were almost overbalanced by hunger." He can also mock his own blood lust as well as British insouciance. "In order neither to sadden nor enrage baboon lovers I will give no details," he states ironically, after a day of bloody baboon control. When he lines up the grotesque corpses, G.C. appears and speaks as if they'd been grouse-shooting on the Scottish moors: "Babooning, I see. Two brace. A splendid bag. Going to have them set up by [the taxidermist] Roland Ward?"

Hemingway throws some light on his heavy drinking, which increased after the plane crashes, when his damaged body could no longer tolerate the alcohol. Drink makes him "brave against the nightmares," but also deadens as well as heightens his teeming brain: "It was a purposeful dulling of a receptivity that was so highly sensitized, as film can be, that if your receptiveness were always kept at the same level it would become unbearable."

The contrast between the younger and older Hemingway on the two safaris—what Joyce's Leopold Bloom calls "Me. And me now"—inevitably wakens a sense of loss. "There are an awful lot of things I'm not sure I can go back to," he observes, though he can still recapture his most vital memories. The best part of the book is a two-page recollection of a gory incident in the Rockies, sparked by the sight of African eagles soaring in the air currents.

Suddenly, he's "at the top of a pass in our own mountains with a .22 rifle waiting for eagles to come to a dead horse that had been bear bait until the bear was killed." He explains that his horse's hoof had split and he couldn't be ridden, so he shoots him and "all of him dropped together and he was a bear bait." When he returns to the kill, the bear has eaten the horse's guts and the eagles have torn out his eyes. "One came, finally, dropping like the sound of an incoming shell and breaking, with double-forward pinions and feathered legs and talons thrust forward to hit Old Kite as though he were killing him." Hemingway watches them devour his old horse, then begins to slaughter them. Catching an eagle that's been wounded by his shot and is large enough to carry off a bighorn lamb, he smashes its head against a tree. The eagles

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have acted as predators must act, but Hemingway, mastered by the brute blood of the air, gets caught up in the cycle of slaughter. He's seen the savagery and, like Conrad's Kurtz, becomes savage himself.

Multicultural mishmash

Neil Philip, editor The New Oxford Book of Children's Verse.
Oxford University Press, 371 pages, $30

reviewed by William Jay Smith

These days when children, if not blasting one another with shotguns in schoolyards, are glued to the television where every type of adult entertainment is available to them, it is becoming more and more difficult to differentiate between adult literature and literature written specifically for or directed to children. With children treated almost everywhere as adults, how can one have an anthology like this one that proclaims itself a "collection of 'children's verse?'" That term, the editor Neil Philip immediately recognizes, covers a multitude of sins. "I have taken it to mean," he writes,

> verse written for children, or with them prominently in mind, or published for them with the explicit endorsement of the author. . . . The problem is essentially one of definition. What is children's poetry, and how does it differ from poetry in general? This anthology is itself a full answer to this difficult question, but it is not an easy answer to summarize.

Some may argue that "the very notion of poetry for children is nonsense. . . . There is only poetry, good or bad." Yet there is a "recognizable tradition that is at once separate from and intermingled with a larger poetic tradition, but it has its own landmarks and its own rhetoric," and it is this tradition, from its beginning in the eighteenth century down to the present, that this book attempts to trace.

For many, this tradition, after Blake, Lear, Lewis Carroll, and Christina Rossetti, reached its peak in a lost golden age when a succession of poets from Robert Louis Stevenson and Eugene Field to A. A. Milne and Eleanor Farjeon, attuned to the child's viewpoint, captured in traditional forms the essence of childhood. It is this golden age that the first half of this volume clearly presents. For others these poets are "poets of the nursery, irrelevant to the modern world: comforting, sentimental and drenched in nostalgia." What children today require is "something shorter and snappier: what Spike Milligan has proudly termed 'silly verse for kids.'" Although Philip claims to find this sort of verse empty as well as silly, "offering instant gratification but no sustenance," the second half of his anthology is filled with it.

Philip holds that, like most postmodernist writers in other modes, today's children's poets "have deconstructed the rhetoric of children's poetry." The result is a new-found formal freedom: the use of free verse, the arrangement of poetry in patterns on the page, the writing of concrete poetry (the first modern example of which is Lewis Carroll's "The Mouse's Tale" from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*). But more typical of modern children's poetry, in his view, is a thriving tradition of performance poetry, poetry in which the "printed words are not so much a blueprint for performance as the performance is an expression of the text." In such poetry one often confronts "the impossibility of confining the free voice in the strait-jacket of type."

It is certainly true that children's poetry has always been written to be read aloud, and it may well be that "the performance qualities of many modern writers extend rather than disrupt the tradition." Philip is eager to represent in full the ethnic and cultural diversity of contemporary writing for children, ranging from African American and Aborigine to Caribbean and Black British to New Zealander and Canadian, that he sees as extending this tradition. Here is the conclusion of "Poetry Jump-Up" by John Agard, a Guyanese poet:

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Words feelin hot hot hot
big words feelin hot hot hot
lil words feelin hot hot hot
even sad words can't help
tappin dey toe
to de riddum of de poetry band
Dis is poetry carnival
dis is poetry bacchanal
so come on everybody
join de celebration
all you need is plenty perspiration
an a little inspiration
plenty perspiration
an a little inspiration

There is indeed very little inspiration here. Nor is there much more in "Taking the Plunge," by the English poet John Mole, which ends like this:

Knock me down with a sparrow's feather,
How about us going out together?

Groovy, t'riffic, brill and smashing,
Me 'n' you, we could start things splashing.

Watcha cocky, tara, see ya,
Meet me for a coke in the cafeteria.

Halleluja and Amen,
If you like this poem you can read it again.

One wonders how many young readers will want to accept this invitation. We have learned from rap and poetry slams, which may seem immediately satisfying to any number of young people, that what comes off the page is only what is there in the first place, no matter how skillful the performer.

Philip is so intent on identifying every individual voice and its individual English that in the index of authors he lists poets as English, Irish, Scottish, Jamaican, African American, Asian American, Native American—Creek, Australian. All this leads to some peculiar juxtapositions: below Ciardi, John (American) comes Cisneros, Sandra (Hispanic American). One wonders why an Italo-American is not identified as such. Italian-dialect poems, once very much in vogue in collections for young people, are now thought to be in bad taste, but Black-dialect poems like those of Sonia Sanchez are given a prominent place:

cain't nobody tell me any different
i'm ugly anybody with sense can see.
but, one day i hope somebody will stop me
and say
looka here, a pretty little black girl lookin' just
like me.

This kind of thing Philip considers part of a "more boisterous, less reflective street-smart poetry" in which the focus is "on the rhythms of speech not the patterns of prosody, on school, not home."

"Much of the best American children's verse is scarcely known in Britain," Philip correctly contends, "and the poets themselves represented only by a few hackneyed anthology pieces. Yet since Eugene Field and James Whitcomb Riley America has consistently produced children's poetry of great energy and invention." He sets out to correct this situation by reprinting wonderful pieces by Theodore Roethke, Langston Hughes, Karla Kushkin, Eve Merriam, and Aileen Fisher. May Swenson's "The Centaur" is here, as is e.e. cummings's "maggie and milly and molly and may," along with Ogden Nash's "Adventures of Isabel." He comes up with little-known pieces like "I am Cherry Alive" by Delmore Schwartz. Elizabeth Bishop's "Manners (For a Child of 1918)" is here, a beautiful poem in the simplest language:

My grandfather said to me
as we sat on the wagon seat,
"Be sure to remember to always
speak to everyone you meet."

Here also is X. J. Kennedy's "Lighting a Fire," which is sure to catch any small child's attention:

One quick scratch
Of a kitchen match
And giant flames unzip!

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How do they store
So huge a roar
In such a tiny tip?

For all Philip's effort to set the record straight on American children's verse, he leaves great gaps. Davis McCord is represented by his well-known, and to my mind pedestrian, "Five Chants" with only one of his shorter, more significant, lyrics. The greatest disappointment is to find Elizabeth Madox Roberts, who was undoubtedly the greatest children's poet of the midcentury, represented by two poems that have been frequently reprinted and none of her other lyrics that give such an unforgettable picture of growing up in the rural South. There are welcome selections of American wit and humor from John Ciardi and Richard Wilbur but little of American nonsense. Jack Prelutsky is here, but there is no Shel Silverstein and no Dr. Seuss, who, whatever else he is, certainly qualifies as the American performance poet *par excellence*.

In the middle of a multicultural mishmash, Philip calls attention to two poets who have worked within the accepted tradition of children's poetry and yet have produced work that he believes can take its place beside the top achievements in the field: Charles Causley and Ted Hughes. Causley is a poet who strives to capture that sense of wonder that we find in Blake and de la Mare, but Hughes has none of this freshness. The poetry in Hughes's prize-winning volumes that Philip finds "harsh, funny, urgent, potent" I find flat and predictable, as in the final lines of "Rooks love excitement:"

Were they shouting at me? What did they
fear?
It sounded
More like a packed football stadium, at the
shock
of a longed-for goal—
A sudden upfling of everything, a surfing
cheer.

What Neil Philip has really given us in these pages is a collection of poems for a televised multiracial classroom, where the camera can zoom in on bright faces of all colors and shapes and where each student is allowed a sound bite with his or her voice with its special local lilt and its individual approach to both English and poetry. Philip's hero, the teacher Michael Rosen, oversees the entire scene with his poem "Eddie and the Birthday," which is all about a two-year-old who wants his birthday to go on and on. It is not funny at all, but I can see how, when read with the proper mimicry and inflections, it might reduce kids to stitches. Another teacher, Brian Morse, who contributes a lengthy, tedious piece to this collection, describes its effect on his classroom: "Perhaps it's dangerous to quote children's reactions, but my class of six- and seven-year-olds are still demanding rereadings of 'Eddie and the Birthday,' 'Eddie and the Nappy' (in fact all the baby-Eddie poems) and 'Chocolate Cake' six months after they heard them, and greeting me 'Nappy nappy, nappy' in the morning." Rosen's skill, Morse writes, is "to put children in touch with themselves."

Many of the poems in this collection will indeed put children in touch with themselves, and, like "Eddie and the Birthday," send them into peals of laughter about baby Eddie, but they are unlikely to bring them within reach of adult perceptions and thoughts and lead them to that treasure house of English poetry, which should, with proper guidance, be their legacy. Members of my generation committed to memory any number of the great poems in the first half of this anthology; we had them "by heart," which meant in a sense that we had digested a kind of encapsulated passion that would remain with us for a lifetime. It is shocking that so few of the poems of the second half of the century included here seem to offer young readers anything like that.

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Notebook

Sub specie aeternitatis: J. F. Powers, 1917–1999

by John Derbyshire

I was actually reading one of J. F. Powers's books when I heard the news of his death in June. I imagine there are very few people who can make the same claim: Powers's modest body of work (two novels, three short-story collections) has been out of print for years. But for a chance encounter, I doubt that I would ever have read Powers's work at all.

For one thing I am English, with the Englishman's ignorance of American literature—an ignorance I feel properly guilty about when among literary folk, but to the relief of which I am hindered by some strong inward resistance. The United States is supposed by foreigners, very unfairly, to be a place where people read not for pleasure but for moral instruction, not to amuse themselves but to improve themselves. The rigors of an English childhood leave us smug in the conviction that we are either above or below the possibility of improvement and are therefore out of sympathy with American literature.

There is also the *regional* thing. Americans travel a great deal in their own country and have a strong sense of the difference between its various parts, a sense it is difficult for foreigners to acquire and internalize in the same degree. The whole mystique of the South, for example—downward-sliding gentility and upward-clawing white trash, unspeakable secrets lurking behind the magnolia blossoms—is mostly lost on non-Americans. J. F. Powers, whose stories are set almost entirely in Illinois or Minnesota, is inevitably tagged as a Midwestern writer.

And, for another thing, Powers was a Catholic whose principal topic—in both of his novels and a majority of his stories—is the Catholic priesthood. Educated by Anglicans, I arrived in adult life with a full set of anti-Catholic prejudices: dark-robed Jesuits plotting against the crown, Bloody Mary and Foxe's Martyrs, the Borgia Popes and the pig-headed James II, celibate priests denying birth control to the overpopulated Third World. Reading and traveling mellowed all this, yet still I can tolerate Catholic writers at book length only if they leave their dogma at the door. Like many other Englishmen, I regard Graham Greene as a brilliant narrative talent yoked to an irritating ideology and *Brideshead Revisited* as a regrettable lapse on the part of our finest mid-century novelist. (I relish Orwell's slap at Waugh: "As good a writer as it is possible to be while holding untenable opinions".)

Thus doubly handicapped—an American Catholic writer—Powers would have been a long time reaching the top—or even the bottom—of my reading pile. After fourteen years in the States, I have only just recently picked up Flannery O'Connor. Then I happened to make the acquaintance of Powers's daughter Katherine (named for her godmother Katherine Anne Porter), who lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts and does a fortnightly books column for *The Boston*

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Globe. On parting at the end of my first visit, she gave me a copy of her father's novel *Morte D'Urban*, which won the National Book Award in 1963. The book languished on my shelf for some months till I needed something to read on a long journey. It conquered me swiftly, within its first few pages.

Here is a middle-aged priest, Father Urban, a star of the Midwestern preaching circuit, a terrific fundraiser, and a great asset to his order, the Order of St. Clement. One of his sermons catches the attention of Billy Cosgrove, a wealthy layman, who then befriends Urban and makes large donations to the Clementines. However, Father Urban's energy vexes his dim-witted superiors, who post him to a dilapidated retreat-house in the wilds of Minnesota. The Clementines, you see, are third-raters.

> It seemed to him [Urban] that the Order of St Clement labored under the curse of mediocrity, and had done so almost from the beginning. In Europe, the Clementines hadn't (it was always said) recovered from the French Revolution. It was certain that they hadn't ever really got going in the New World. . . . The Clementines were unique in that they were noted for nothing at all.

Nothing daunted, Father Urban makes a go of his new assignment, prevailing on Billy Cosgrove to help establish a golf course next to the retreat. Urban's worldliness in the service of his faith seems to have triumphed, but in a denouement set out with wonderful skill, all is turned around. We are given a glimpse of the waters that are under the Earth and a memorable illustration of Doctor Johnson's dictum: "Depend upon it, Sir: the *insolence* of wealth will creep out."

So impressed was I by *Morte D'Urban*, I wrote a letter of appreciation to the author at his home in Saint Cloud, Minnesota. Katherine doubted he would answer. Already eighty-one years old, he was (she said) reclusive and not always clear-headed. However, a letter of thanks soon arrived—succinct, sincere, manually typed. "What a very nice old chap," I thought. Katherine sent on two more of his books: the other novel and one of the story collections. I read the novel first, and was in the middle of the stories when Powers died, on June 15.

Peter De Vries thought that Powers was not really a religious writer at all. I don't agree, but I see what he means. There are no angels in Powers, no miracles, no sudden shafts of light breaking through overcast skies. The supernatural, in fact, is entirely absent. The world of Powers's books is the world we all inhabit: the world of bills and assessments, of irksome duties, comforting habits and tiny pleasures, of tiresome colleagues we have no choice but to get along with, of dead-wood subordinates who must be found something to do and cloth-eared superiors making all the wrong decisions. The work of these priests resembles very closely, in fact, the work most middle-class Americans do in corporate offices or public bureaucracies. The world of a J. F. Powers book has much in common with the Japanese "business novel" genre, though without the love interest, of course. Here is Father Joe Hackett, principal of Powers's second novel, *Wheat That Springeth Green*, in a conversation (albeit an imaginary one) with his archbishop.

> JOE: I'm not trying to tell you how to run the Archdiocese, Arch.
> ARCH: Might not be a bad idea if you did, Joe. I don't say that to everybody in lower middle management.

Indeed, there are middle managers I know in commercial organizations who regard their customers more tenderly than J. F. Powers's priests do their parishioners. While a B.C.L. (Big Catholic Layman) like Billy Cosgrove might be pursued and wooed for donative purposes, the common laity figure in Powers's stories mostly as a nuisance, to be firmly instructed when they push their fool noses into theological matters, otherwise to be handled in as brisk and

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businesslike a manner as possible. In a short story called "Dawn," a cathedral priest finds a letter in the collection plate addressed to "The Pope—Personal," with no return address. He passes it up the chain of command to his bishop, who hands down instructions to find the sender if possible but not to open the envelope. The priest flushes out the offending party, a scatterbrained parishioner called Mrs. Anton, who tells him the envelope contains a dollar. Why the *personal* approach?

> "I don't want somebody else takin' all the credit with the Holy Father!"
>
> "How's the Holy Father gonna know who this dollar came from if you didn't write anything?"
>
> "I wrote my name and address on it. In ink."
>
> "All right, Father," said the Bishop. He stood up and almost went out of the room before he stopped and looked back at Mrs Anton. "Why don't you send it by regular mail?"
>
> "He'd never see it! That's why! Some flunky'd get hold of it! Same as here! Oh, don't I know!"

This view of the laity as an annoyance to be tolerated rings all too true. It agrees quite comfortably with my Protestant prejudices about thin-lipped Papist commissars striving to keep their flock in a state of ignorance, but probably all large organizations engender some such attitude in their staff. I recall a systems manager I worked for once who used to groan about what a wonderful job he could do if it were not for the damn users. At any rate, I doubt if there is anything especially Catholic here. In fact I have not been able to look at my own (Episcopalian) minister in quite the same light since reading Powers.

Though religious by instinct, Powers does not seem to have been deeply pious. He attended mass regularly, loved his church and had no serious doubts about the existence of God, but he had not much taste for theology, nor for abstract theorizing of any sort. He disliked most of the changes brought in by Vatican II, which he thought tended to deprive the laity of those familiar consolations of custom and usage that made their religion palatable and their lives bearable. "There isn't anything the Church can do that it hasn't already done to disillusion me," he sighed in a 1988 interview, "but I still think it's *it*." He never considered entering the priesthood himself, knowing very well that *Non sibi sed gregi* ("Not for oneself but for the flock") was a standard he could not meet, and that he could not put himself at the disposal of other people—the foolish, the feckless and the plain boring—as a priest is required to do. He was a fastidious and reclusive man who did not suffer fools gladly. Knowing that the Powers family had lived in Ireland during the 1950s, I once quizzed Katherine about her father's acquaintance with various Irish literary figures of the period. Brendan Behan? An emphatic *no*! "My father does *not* like sloppy drunks."

Those Irish sojourns—the Powers family lived in Ireland intermittently from 1951 to 1975—were of a piece with the author's strongly idealistic cast of mind. Of old Norman-Irish stock on his father's side, Powers felt a great attraction for the homeland of his ancestors. There was the Catholicism, but also the respect for literature (writers in Ireland pay no income tax), the neutrality and the general ethos of rustic self-sufficiency—peasant crafts practiced around a peat fire—that prevailed in De Valera's Ireland. Powers was a firm pacifist who did jail time as a conscientious objector in World War II. He detested boosterism, consumerism, materialism, and all approaches to life advertised as "scientific" or "progressive." The Ireland of the 1950s, aloof from the world's squabbles, righteous in her isolation, proud in her poverty, favorite daughter of the church, was naturally irresistible to him. A bonus attraction was that Ireland was the home nation of James Joyce, Powers's great literary hero. (He also loved Swift, who is a sort of honorary Irishman.) The dark side of Irish

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life, when he encountered it, seems to have disconcerted but not disillusioned him. Saints and scholars Ireland has certainly produced in abundance, but the Irish often forget to tell you that one of the factors driving the holy men out to those rocky fastnesses off the west coast, or further to Europe and beyond, was the squalor and savagery of Irish civil society.

Father Joe Hackett, the priest in *Wheat That Springeth Green*, is already middle-aged when most of the action takes place. None of Powers's sympathetic characters is younger than this. (Begun in 1964, *Wheat* was published in 1988, twenty-five years after *Morte d'Urban*. If he is ever canonized, Powers could serve as the patron saint of slow writers. Katherine said, "He had powers of procrastination that went far beyond the merely amateur.")

Powers is not—I think he would have smiled approvingly to hear it said—a *relevant* writer. The only reason one can advance for reading him is the quality of his art, which is of a very high order. Powers took infinite pains with his work. He deplored writing that was careless or inflated, or even just verbose. He did not like the great English novelists of the last century because he thought they used too many words to say what they wanted to say. God, said Powers, has demanding standards. "We couldn't have art unless there were some higher authority that says, 'Yes, that's right'. God gave us that mentality, that kind of judgment. I don't think God likes crap in art."

Here is the old priest Father Didymus dying, at the end of the 1944 story "Lions, Harts, Leaping Does." No tunnels with beckoning lights, no heavenly choirs: only this, when his somewhat senile companion Titus has let their pet canary escape through an open window:

> Titus, nervous under his stare, and to account for staying at the window so long, felt for the draft again, frowned, and kept his eye hunting among the trees.
>
> The thought of being the cause of such elaborate dissimulation in so simple a soul made Didymus want to smile—or cry, he did not know which . . . and could do neither. Titus persisted. How long would it be, Didymus wondered faintly, before Titus ungrievingly gave the canary up for lost in the snowy arms of God? The snowflakes whirled at the window, for a moment for all their bright blue beauty as though struck still by lightning, and Didymus closed his eyes, only to find them there also, but darkly falling.

Said the author: "I have the ability to create and be in touch with God. I can't change bread and wine into body and blood, but I can take the scum or the slime of the earth and make it into a man or woman." This, as a matter of fact, slightly overstates Powers's powers: so far I have encountered no interesting women in his books. But every writer has his scope. Within the small territory he claimed for himself, Powers approached perfection as closely as human beings are permitted to do. Whether these spare, measured narratives, sweetening despair with sly wit and merest hints of Design, can appeal to an audience schooled in layered irony and casual salacity will be tested next March when *The New York Review of Books*, under its own imprint, brings out a uniform edition of his novels and stories. Until then the works of James Farl Powers, who is now beyond disappointment or injured pride, must be sought in garage sales and second-hand book stores.

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Letters

Paul Verlaine

To the Editors:
Regarding John Simon's recent review of my *One Hundred and One Poems of Paul Verlaine* (June 1999), I will begin by stating the obvious: few are the readers or authors who take him or his arrogant pronouncements seriously any more, if, indeed, they ever did. I will refrain from citing the many *poets and translators* of recognized stature whose very positive opinions of my work are so glaringly at odds with the negative one put forth by our criticaster. Nor will I take up the three or four specific instances where he faults my aesthetic taste; he is, after all, entitled to his own.

What bemuses and amuses me, however, is Mr. Simon's pretension to authoritative poetic judgment. He is not himself a poet; nor, as he reveals over and over—in this diatribe, as elsewhere—does he have the glimmer of a poet's sensibilities. (At least not in English; I do not know if he writes or translates verse in his native language.)

Applying his prosaic standards to my own poetic idiom and my transposition of Verlaine's, Mr. Simon questions, in fact, the value of translating poetry at all, dubbing it, from his lofty perch, a "useless" exercise. In resurrecting the tired old Frostian saw, he proves himself impervious to the delight, for translator as well as reader, in evoking the suggestions, the rhythms, the echoes of sense and sound, that transcend the simple dictionary definitions.

The proper task of the translator is to try to capture as many of all those intangibles as possible, in addition to the poem's "meaning"; and, in the case of a formal poet like Verlaine, to do so with rhyme and meter in a manner consonant with the author's own liberties and self-imposed restrictions. Our task is not to produce a line-for-line correspondence to aid the uninitiated—not to pair every scrap and bit of verse with its precisely matching equivalent—but, rather, to re-create a totality of sound, color, tone, and sense, in collaboration with the original text. Mr. Simon's carpings and niggling cavils seem to indicate that he does not know, or has forgotten, this basic tenet.

Enough said. Let the reader decide how much credence to pay this professional naysayer, who has long since become a caricature of himself.

Norman Shapiro
Wesleyan University

To the Editors:
I very much enjoyed John Simon's excellent article on the impossibility of translating Verlaine (June 1999), the most recent evidence of which appeared in Norman Shapiro's turgid efforts.

May I point out a small but not inconsequential slip in Simon's literal translation of the last two verses of "Clair de Lune": "*Et sangloter d'extase les jets d'eau,/ Les grands jets d'eau sveltes parmi les marbres.*" Simon gives us: "And cause to sob with ecstasy the water jets,/ The great jets of water, slender amid the marbles." Strangely, Simon misses part of what accounts for the sonorous beauty of these verses, namely the repetition

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of "*jets d'eau*" and so, literally, it should read: "And cause to sob with ecstasy the water jets,/ *The tall water jets*, slender amid the marbles."

I also think Verlaine's meaning of "*grands*" is better rendered as "tall," not "great," in describing water jets. Still, thank you John Simon.

Philippe de Montebello
Metropolitan Museum of Art

John Simon replies:

It behooves writers, including translators, to learn to read before they start writing. I did not call translating poetry a useless exercise; useless, I wrote, is only a bad verse translation by someone unfit for the job. I wish Mr. Shapiro had not been so modest as to refrain from citing the "many poets and translators of recognized stature [with] very positive opinions" of his work; personally, I would have settled for one or two names from those categories. I did not fault his "aesthetic taste" (yet another example of his chronic redundancy) in "three or four" instances; I adduced a goodly number of them, including one complete poem. These are indeed offenses against what he rightly terms "the suggestions, the rhythms, the echoes of sense and sound" of the original. Well, he does get *multiple* echoes: Where Verlaine uses one fresh and vivid word, Mr. Shapiro tends to supply two or three usually stale, jingling, pleonastic, and often outmoded ones.

However, if he or any reader of my review is unpersuaded by my choices, let him open any page of Mr. Shapiro's volume and find, I guarantee it, no fewer aberrancies. I may not have "the glimmer of a poet's sensibilities," but I did publish poems and verse translations in a number of reputable journals and some anthologies (names provided on request) before switching to the, for me, more congenial medium of prose—an example Mr. Shapiro might profitably have emulated.

As for Mr. de Montebello, whether "*grands jets d'eau*" is better rendered as *tall* than as *great*, seems to me open to—somewhat otiose—debate; each epithet has its slightly different merit. I was, of course, aware that Verlaine repeated *jets d'eau* in successive verses, but felt that, given that English, unlike French, had two ways of expressing this, a little variety might add rather than detract from the "sonorous beauty." My appreciation, however, for the distinguished museum director's taking time off from his arduous duties to join the fray is, if not tall, indisputably great.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

"The American Century" at the Whitney *by Hilton Kramer*
The achievement of T. S. Eliot *by Roger Kimball*
Milovan Djilas *by David Pryce-Jones*
Thomas Hardy & American poetry *by David Yezzi*
The career of Madame Roland *by Renee Winegarten*
Willa Cather's *The Professor's House by Donald Lyons*
New poems *by Ben Downing*

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- **E** **Nathaniel Branden:** *Dealing With the Gifted Child* (48 min.)
- **F** **Carlos Castaneda:** *Don Juan: The Sorcerer* (38 min.)
- **G** **Alistair Cooke:** *America: An Outside View* (55 min.)
- **H** **Edward DeBono:** *How to Change Ideas* (55 min.)
- **I** **Erich Fromm:** *To Have or to Be: The Nature of the Psyche* (56 min.)
- **J** **Robert Frost:** *An Evening with Robert Frost* (55 min.)
- **K** **Buckminster Fuller:** *Twentieth-Century Renaissance* (55 min.)
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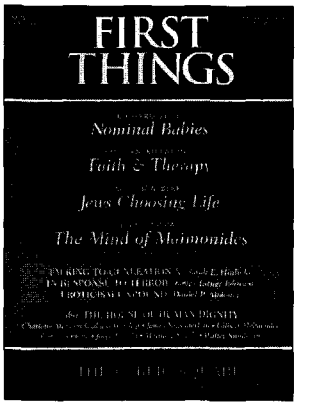

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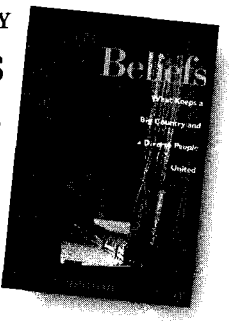

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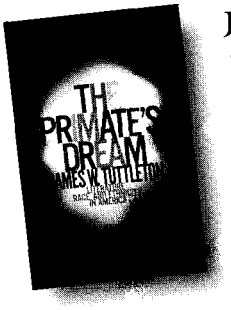

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